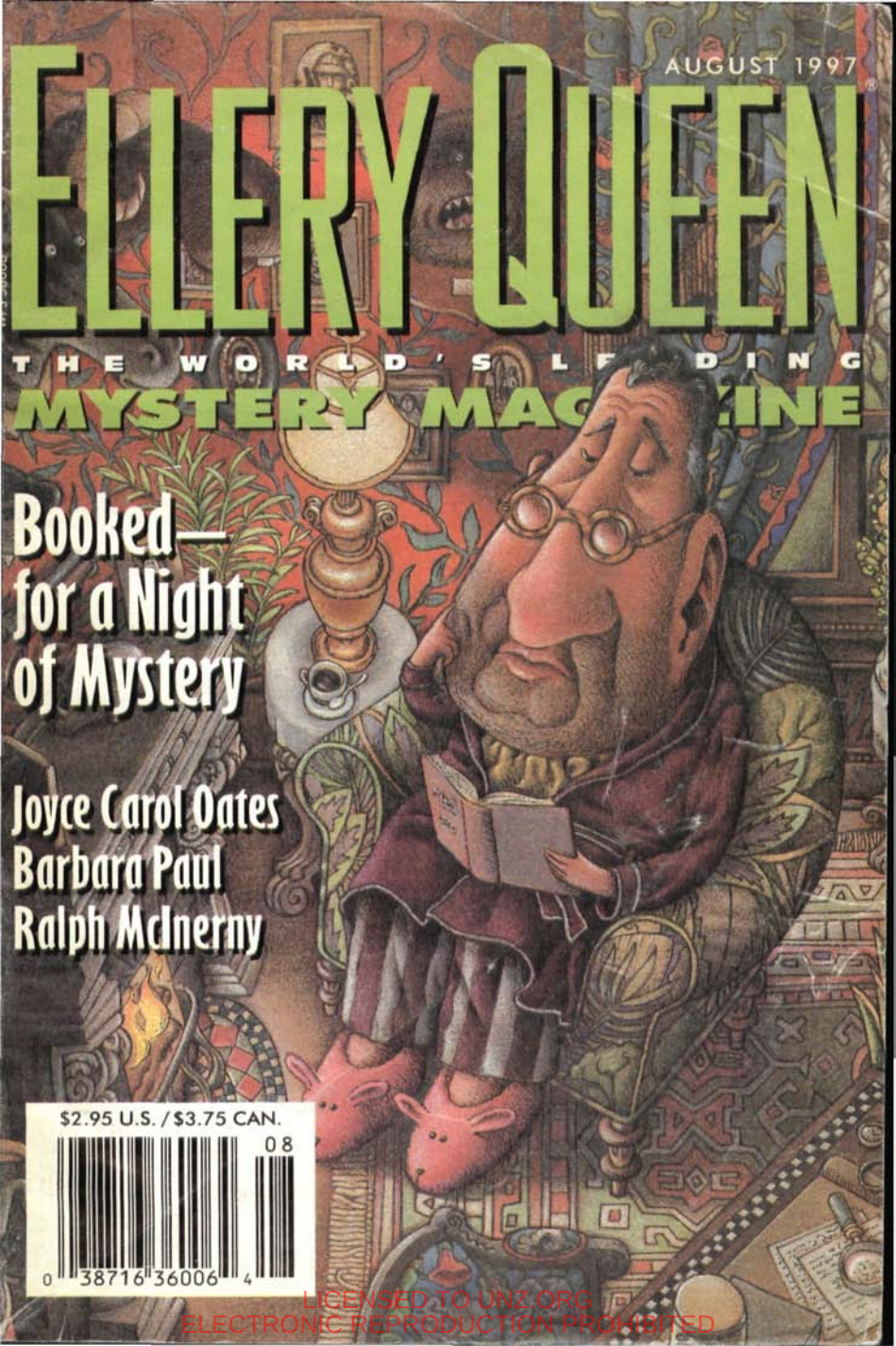

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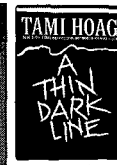

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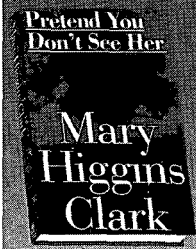

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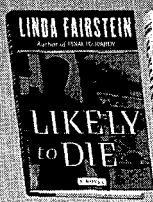

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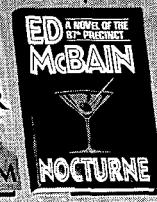

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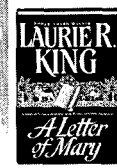

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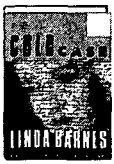

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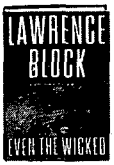

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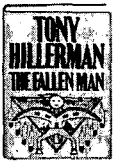

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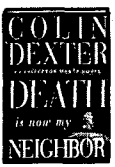

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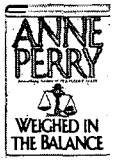

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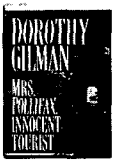

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Art by Allen Davis

DEATH CUP

by Joyce Carol Oates

Amanita phalloides he began to hear in no voice he could recognize.

Murmurous, only just audible—*Amanita phalloides.*

More distinctly that morning, a rain-chilled Saturday morning in June, at his uncle's funeral. In the austere old Congregationalist church he only entered, as an adult, for such ceremonies as weddings and funerals. As, seated beside his brother Alastor of whom he disapproved strongly, he leaned far forward in the cramped hardwood pew, framing his face with his fingers so that he was spared seeing his brother's profile in the corner of his eye. Feeling an almost physical repugnance for the man who was his brother. He tried to concentrate on the white-haired minister's solemn words yet was nervously distracted by *Amanita phalloides.* As if, beneath the man's familiar words of Christian forbearance and uplift another voice, a contrary voice, strange, incantatory,

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was struggling to emerge. And during the interlude of organ music. The Bach Toccata and Fugue in D Minor which his uncle, an amateur musician and philanthropist, had requested be played at his funeral. Lyle was one who, though he claimed to love music, was often distracted during it; his mind drifting; his thoughts like flotsam, or froth; now hearing the whispered words, only just audible in his ears *Amanita phalloides, Amanita phalloides.* He realized he'd first heard these mysterious words the night before, in a dream. A sort of fever-dream. Brought on by his brother's sudden, unexpected return.

Although she is usually considered a "literary" writer, Joyce Carol Oates has made many contributions to the mystery/suspense field. Her appreciation for genre fiction comes out not only in her own novels and stories, but in her work on projects such as the selection of *Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* (Ecco Press/'97). A new collection of Ms. Oates's own short stories, *Man Crazy* (Dutton), will be out this fall. ¶

He did not hate his brother Alastor. Not here, in this sacred place.

Amanita phalloides. Amanita phalloides . . .

How beautiful, the Bach organ music! Filling the spartan plain, dazzlingly white interior of the church with fierce cascades of sound pure and flashing as a waterfall. Such music argued for the essential dignity of the human spirit. The transcendence of physical pain, suffering, loss. All that's petty, ignoble. *The world is a beautiful place if you have the eyes to see it and the ears to hear it,* Lyle's uncle had often said, and had seemed to believe through his long life, apparently never dissuaded from the early idealism of his youth; yet how was such idealism possible, Lyle couldn't help but wonder, Lyle who wished to believe well of others yet had no wish to be a fool, how was such idealism possible after the evidence of catastrophic world wars, the unspeakable evil of the Holocaust, equally mad, barbaric mass slaughters in Stalin's Russia, Mao's China? Somehow, his uncle Gardner King had remained a vigorous, good-natured, and generous man despite such facts of history; there'd been in him, well into his seventies, a childlike simplicity

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which Lyle, his nephew, younger than he by decades, seemed never to have had. Lyle had loved his uncle, who'd been his father's eldest brother. Fatherless himself since the age of eleven, he'd been saddened by his uncle's gradual descent into death from cancer of the larynx, and had not wanted to think that he would probably be remembered, to some degree, in his uncle's will. The bulk of the King estate, many millions of dollars, would go into the King Foundation, which was nominally directed by his wife, now widow, Alida King; the rest of it would be divided among numerous relatives. Lyle was troubled by the anticipation of any bequest, however modest. The mere thought filled him with anxiety, almost a kind of dread. *I would not wish to benefit in any way from Uncle Gardner's death, I could not bear it.*

To which his brother Alastor would have replied in his glib, jocular way, as, when they were boys, he'd laughed at Lyle's overscrupulous conscience: *What good's that attitude? Our uncle is dead and he isn't coming back, is he?*

Unfortunate that Alastor had returned home to Contracoeur on the very eve of their uncle's death, after an absence of six years.

Still, it could only have been coincidence. So Alastor claimed. He'd been in communication with none of the relatives, including his twin brother Lyle.

How murmurous, teasing in Lyle's ears—*Amanita phalloides.*

Intimate as a lover's caressing whisper, and mysterious—*Amanita phalloides.*

Lyle was baffled at the meaning of these words. Why, at such a time, his thoughts distracted by grief, they should assail him.

In the hardwood pew, unpleasantly crowded by Alastor on his left, not wanting to crowd, himself, against an elderly aunt on his right, Lyle felt his lean, angular body quiver with tension. His neck was beginning to ache from the strain of leaning forward. It annoyed him to realize that, in his unstylish matte-black gabardine suit that fitted him too tightly across the shoulders and too loosely elsewhere, with his ash-colored hair straggling past his collar, his face furrowed as if with pain, and the peculiar way he held his outstretched fingers against his face, he was making himself conspicuous among the rows of mourners in the King family pews. Staring at the gleaming ebony casket so prominently placed in the center aisle in front of the communion rail, that looked so forbidding; so gigantic; far larger than his uncle Gardner's earthly remains, diminutive at the end, would seem to require. *But of*

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course death is larger than life. Death envelops life: the emptiness that precedes our brief span of time, the emptiness that follows.

A shudder ran through him. Tears stung his cheeks like acid. How shaky, how emotional he'd become!

A nudge in his side—his brother Alastor pressed a handkerchief, white, cotton, freshly laundered, into his hand, which Lyle blindly took.

Managing, even then, not to glance at his brother. Not to upset himself seeing yet again his brother's mock-pious mock-grieving face. His watery eyes, in mimicry of Lyle's.

Now the organ interlude was over. The funeral service was ending so soon! Lyle felt a childish stab of dismay, that his uncle would be hurried out of the sanctuary of the church, out of the circle of the community, into the impersonal, final earth. Yet the white-haired minister was leading the congregation in a familiar litany of words beginning, "Our heavenly father . . ." Lyle wiped tears from his eyelashes, shut his eyes tightly in prayer. He hadn't been a practicing Christian since adolescence, he was impatient with unquestioned piety and superstition, yet there was solace in such a ritual, seemingly shared by an entire community. Beside him, his aunt Agnes prayed with timid urgency, as if God were in this church and needed only to be beseeched by the right formula of words, and in the right tone of voice. On his other side, his brother Alastor intoned the prayer, not ostentatiously but distinctly enough to be heard for several pews; Alastor's voice was a deep, rich baritone, the voice of a trained singer you might think, or an actor. A roaring in Lyle's ears like a waterfall—*Amanita phalloides! Amanita phalloides!* and suddenly he remembered what *Amanita phalloides* was: the death-cup mushroom. He'd been reading a pictorial article on edible and inedible fungi in one of his science magazines and the death-cup mushroom, more accurately a "toadstool," had been imprinted on his memory.

His mouth had gone dry, his heart was hammering against his ribs. With the congregation, he murmured, "Amen." All volition seemed to have drained from him. Calmly he thought, *I will kill my brother Alastor after all. After all these years.*

Of course, this would never happen. Alastor King was a hateful person who surely deserved to die, but Lyle, his twin brother, was not one to commit any act of violence; not even one to fantasize any act of violence. *Not me! not me! Never.*

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In the cemetery behind the First Congregationalist Church of Contracoeur the remainder of the melancholy funeral rite was enacted. There stood Lyle King, the dead man's nephew, in a daze in wet grass beneath a glaring opalescent sky, awakened by strong fingers gripping his elbow. "All right if I ride with you to Aunt Alida's, Lyle?" Alastor asked. There was an edge of impatience to his lowered voice, as if he'd had to repeat his question. And Lyle's twin brother had not been one, since the age of eighteen months, to wish to repeat questions. He was leaning close to Lyle as if hoping to read his thoughts; his eyes were steely blue, narrowed. His breath smelled of something sweetly chemical, mouthwash probably, to disguise the alcohol on his breath; Lyle knew he was carrying a pocket flask in an inside pocket. His handsome ruddy face showed near-invisible broken capillaries like exposed nerves. Lyle murmured, "Of course, Alastor. Come with me." His thoughts flew ahead swiftly—there was Cemetery Hill that was treacherously steep, and the High Street Bridge—opportunities for accidents? Somehow Lyle's car might swerve out of control, skid on the wet pavement, Alastor, who scorned to wear a seat belt, might be thrown against the windshield, might be injured, might die, while he, Lyle, buckled in safely, might escape with but minor injuries. And blameless. Was that possible? Would God watch over him?

Not possible. For Lyle would have to drive other relatives in his car, too. He couldn't risk their lives. And there was no vigilant God.

A simple self-evident fact, though a secret to most of the credulous world: Alastor King, attractive, intelligent, and deathly "charming" as he surely was, was as purely hateful, vicious, and worthless an individual as ever lived. His brother Lyle had grown to contemplate him with horror the way a martyr of ancient times might have contemplated the engine of pain and destruction rushing at him. *How can so evil a person deserve to live?* Lyle had wondered, sick with loathing of him. (This was years ago when the brothers were twenty. Alastor had secretly seduced their seventeen-year-old cousin Susan, and within a week or two lost interest in her, causing the girl to attempt suicide and to suffer a breakdown from which she would never fully recover.) Yet, maddening, Alastor had continued to live, and live. Nothing in the normal course of events would stop him.

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Except Lyle. His twin. Who alone of the earth's billions of inhabitants understood Alastor's heart.

And so how shocked Lyle had been, how sickened, having hurried to the hospital when word came that his uncle Gardner was dying, only to discover, like the materialization of one of his nightmares, his brother Alastor already there! Strikingly dressed as usual, with an expression of care, concern, solicitude, clasping their aunt Alida's frail hand and speaking softly and reassuringly to her, and to the others, most of them female relatives, in the visitors' waiting room outside the intensive care unit. As if Alastor hadn't been mysteriously absent from Contracoeur for six years, not having returned even for their mother's funeral; as if he hadn't disappeared abruptly when he'd left, having been involved in a dubious business venture and owing certain of the relatives money, including Uncle Gardner (an undisclosed sum—Lyle didn't doubt it was many thousands of dollars) and Lyle himself (three thousand five hundred dollars).

Lyle had stood in the doorway, staring in disbelief. He had not seen his twin brother in so long, he'd come to imagine that Alastor no longer existed in any way hurtful to him.

Alastor cried, "Lyle, Brother, hello! Good to see you!—except this is such a tragic occasion."

Swiftly Alastor came to Lyle, seizing his forearm, shaking his hand vigorously as if to disarm him. He was smiling broadly, with his old bad-boyish air, staring Lyle boldly in the face and daring him to wrench away. Lyle stammered a greeting, feeling his face burn. *He has come back like a bird of prey, now Uncle Gardner is dying.* Alastor nudged Lyle in the ribs, saying in a chiding voice that he'd returned to Contracoeur just by chance, to learn the sad news about their uncle—"I'd have thought, Lyle, that you might have kept your own brother better informed. As when Mother died, too, so suddenly, and I didn't learn about it for months."

Lyle protested, "But you were traveling—in Europe, you said—out of communication with everyone. You—"

But Alastor was performing for Aunt Alida and the others, and so interrupted Lyle to cry, with a pre-

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tense of great affection, "How unchanged you are, Lyle! How happy I am to see you." It wasn't enough for Alastor to have gripped Lyle's hand so hard he'd nearly broken the fingers, now he had to embrace him; a rough bearlike hug that nearly cracked Lyle's ribs, calculated to suggest to those who looked on *See how natural I am, how spontaneous and loving, and how stiff and unnatural my brother is, and has always been, though we're supposed to be twins.* Lyle had endured this performance in the past and had no stomach for it now, pushing Alastor away and saying in an angry undertone, "You! What are you doing here! I'd think you'd be damned ashamed, coming back like this." Not missing a beat, Alastor laughed and said, winking, one actor to another in a play performed for a credulous, foolish audience, "But why, brother? When you can be ashamed for both of us?" And he squeezed Lyle's arm with deliberate force, making him wince; as he'd done repeatedly when they were boys, daring Lyle to protest to their parents. *Daring me to respond with equal violence.* Then slinging a heavy arm around Lyle's shoulders, and walking him back to the women, as if Lyle were the reluctant visitor, and he, Alastor, the self-appointed host. Lyle quickly grasped, to his disgust, that Alastor had already overcome their aunt Alida's distrust of him and had made an excellent impression on everyone, brilliantly playing the role of the misunderstood prodigal son, tender-hearted, grieved by his uncle's imminent death, and eager—so eager!—to give comfort to his well-to-do aunt.

How desperately Lyle wanted to take Aunt Alida aside, for she was an intelligent woman, and warn her *Take care! My brother is after Uncle Gardner's fortune!* But of course he didn't dare; it wasn't in Lyle King's nature to be manipulative.

In this way, Alastor King returned to Contracoeur.

And within a few days, to Lyle's disgust, he'd reestablished himself with most of the relatives and certain of his old friends and acquaintances; probably, Lyle didn't doubt, with former women friends. He'd overcome Alida King's distrust and this had set the tone for the others. Though invited to stay with relatives, he'd graciously declined and had taken up residence at the Black River Inn; Lyle knew that his brother wanted privacy, no one spying on him, but others interpreted this gesture as a wish not to intrude, or impinge upon family generosity. How thoughtful Alastor had become; how kind, how *mature*. So Lyle was hearing on all sides.

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It was put to him repeatedly, maddeningly: "You must be so happy, Lyle, that your brother has returned. You must have missed him terribly."

And Lyle would smile wanly, politely, and say, "Yes. Terribly."

The worst of it was, apart from the threat Alastor posed to Alida King, that Lyle, who'd succeeded in pushing his brother out of his thoughts for years, was forced to think of him again; to think obsessively of him again; to recall the myriad hurts, insults, outrages he'd suffered from Alastor; and the numerous cruel and even criminal acts Alastor had perpetrated, with seeming impunity. And of course he was always being thrown into Alastor's company: always the fraudulent, happy cry, "Lyle! Brother!"—always the exuberant, rib-crushing embrace, a mockery of brotherly affection. On one occasion, when he'd gone to pick up Alastor at the hotel, Lyle had staved Alastor off with an elbow, grimacing. "Damn you, Alastor, stop. We're not on stage, no one's watching." Alastor said, laughing, with a contemptuous glance around, "What do you mean, Brother? Someone is always watching."

It was true. Even on neutral ground, in the foyer of the Black River Inn, for instance, people often glanced at Alastor King. In particular, women were drawn to his energetic, boyish good looks and bearing.

As if they saw not the man himself but the incandescent, seductive image of the man's desire: his wish to deceive.

While, seeing Lyle, they saw merely—Lyle.

What particularly disgusted Lyle was that his brother's hypocrisy was so transparent. Yet so convincing. And he, the less demonstrative brother, was made to appear hesitant, shy, anemic by comparison. Lacking, somehow, manliness itself. Alastor was such a dazzling sight: his hair that should have been Lyle's identical shade of faded ashy-brown was a brassy russet-brown, lifting from his forehead in waves that appeared crimped, while Lyle's thinning hair was limp, straight. Alastor's sharply blue eyes were alert and watchful and flirtatious while Lyle's duller blue eyes were gently myopic and vague behind glasses that were invariably finger-smudged. Apart from a genial flush to his skin, from an excess of food and drink, Alastor radiated an exuberant sort of masculine health; if you didn't look closely, his face appeared youthful, animated, while Lyle's was beginning to show the inroads of time, small worried dents and creases, particularly at the corners of his eyes. Alastor was at least twenty pounds heav-

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ier than Lyle, thick in the torso, as if he'd been building up muscles, while Lyle, lean, rangy, with an unconscious tendency to slouch, looked by comparison wan and uncoordinated. (In fact, Lyle was a capable swimmer and an enthusiastic tennis player.) Since early adolescence Alastor had dressed with verve: At the hospital, he'd worn what appeared to be a suit of suede, honey-colored, with an elegantly cut jacket and a black silk shirt worn without a tie; after their uncle's death, he'd switched to theatrical mourning, in muted-gray fashionable clothes, a linen coat with exaggerated padded shoulders, trousers with prominent creases, shirts so pale a blue they appeared a grieving white, and a midnight blue necktie of some beautiful glossy fabric. And he wore expensive black leather shoes with soles that gave him an extra inch of height—so that Lyle, who had always been Alastor's height exactly, was vexed by being forced *to look up at him*. Lyle, who had no vanity, and some might say not enough pride, wore the identical matte-black gabardine suit in an outdated style he'd worn for years on special occasions; often he shaved without really looking at himself in the mirror, his mind turned inward; sometimes he rushed out of the house without combing his hair. He was a sweet-natured, vague-minded young-old man with the look of a perennial bachelor, held in affectionate if bemused regard by those who knew him well, largely ignored by others. After graduating summa cum laude from Williams College—while Alastor had dropped out, under suspicious circumstances, from Amherst—Lyle had returned to Contracoeur to lead a quiet, civilized life: He lived in an attractively converted carriage house on what had been his parents' property, gave private music lessons, and designed books for a small New England press specializing in limited editions distinguished within the trade, but little known elsewhere. He'd had several moderately serious romances that had come to nothing yet he harbored, still, a vague hope of marriage; friends were always trying to match him with eligible young women, as in a stubborn parlor game no one wished to give up. (In fact, Lyle had secretly adored his cousin Susan, whom Alastor had seduced; after that sorry episode, and Susan's subsequent marriage and move to Boston, Lyle seemed to himself to have lost heart for the game.) It amused Lyle to think that Alastor was considered a "world traveler"—an "explorer"—for he was certain that his brother had spent time in prison, in the United States; in

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Europe, in his late twenties, he'd traveled with a rich older woman who'd conveniently died and left him some money.

It wasn't possible to ask Alastor a direct question, and Lyle had long since given up trying. He'd given up, in fact, making much effort to communicate with Alastor at all. For Alastor only lied to him, with a maddening habit of smiling and winking and sometimes nudging him in the ribs as if to say *I know you despise me, Brother. And so what? You're too cowardly to do anything about it.*

At the funeral luncheon, Lyle noted glumly that Alastor was seated beside their aunt Alida and that the poor woman, her mind clearly weakened from the strain of her husband's death, was gazing up at Alastor as once she'd gazed at her husband Gardner: with infinite trust. Aunt Alida was one of those women who'd taken a special interest in Lyle from time to time, hoping to match him with a potential bride, and now, it seemed, she'd forgotten Lyle entirely. But then she was paying little attention to anyone except Alastor. Through the buzz and murmur of voices—Lyle winced to hear how frequently Alastor was spoken of, in the most laudatory way—he could make out fragments of their conversation; primarily Alastor's grave, unctuous voice. "And were Uncle Gardner's last days peaceful?—did he look back upon his life with joy?—that's all that matters." Seeing Lyle's glare of indignation, Alastor raised his glass of wine in a subtly mocking toast, smiling, just perceptibly winking, so that no one among the relatives could guess the message he was sending to his twin, as frequently he'd done when they were boys, in the company of their parents. *See? How clever I am? And what gullible fools these others are, to take me seriously?*

Lyle flushed angrily, so distracted he nearly overturned his water goblet.

Afterward, questioned about his travels, Alastor was intriguingly vague. Yet all his tales revolved around himself; always, Alastor King was the hero. Saving a young girl from drowning when a Greek steamer struck another boat, in the Mediterranean; establishing a medical trust fund for beggars, in Cairo; giving aid to a young black heroin addict adrift in Amsterdam. . . . Lyle listened with mounting disgust as the relatives plied Alastor with more questions, believing everything he said no matter how absurd; having forgotten, or wishing to forget, how he'd disappeared from Contracoeur owing some of them money. Alastor was,

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it seemed, now involved in the importing into the United States of "masterworks of European culture"; elliptically he suggested that his business would flourish, and pay off investors handsomely, if only it might be infused with a little more capital. He was in partnership with a distinguished Italian artist of an "impoverished noble family". . . . As Alastor sipped wine, it seemed to Lyle that his features grew more vivid, as if he were an actor in a film, magnified many times. His artfully dyed brassy-brown hair framed his thuggish fox-face in crimped waves so that he looked like an animated doll. Lyle would have asked him sceptically who the distinguished artist was, what was the name of their business, but he knew that Alastor would give glib, convincing answers. Except for Lyle, everyone at the table was gazing at Alastor with interest, admiration, and, among the older women, yearning; you could imagine these aging women, shaken by the death of one of their contemporaries, looking upon Alastor as if he were a fairy prince, promising them their youth again, their lost innocence. They had only to believe in him unstintingly, to "invest" in his latest business scheme. "Life is a ceaseless pilgrimage up a mountain," Alastor was saying. "As long as you're in motion, your perspective is obscured. Only when you reach the summit and turn to look back, can you be at peace."

There was a hushed moment at the table, as if Alastor had uttered holy words. Aunt Alida had begun to weep, quietly. Yet there was a strange sort of elation in her weeping. Lyle, who rarely drank, and never during the day, found himself draining his second glass of white wine. *Amanita phalloides. Amanita* . . . He recalled how, years ago, when they were young children, Alastor had so tormented him that he'd lost control suddenly and screamed, flailing at his brother with his fists, knocking Alastor backward, astonished. Their mother had quickly intervened. But Lyle remembered vividly. *I wasn't a coward, once.*

Lyle drove Alastor back to the Black River Inn in silence. And Alastor himself was subdued, as if his performance had exhausted him. He said, musing aloud, "Aunt Alida has aged so, I was

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shocked. They all have. I don't see why you hadn't kept in closer touch with me, Lyle; you could have reached me care of American Express anytime you'd wanted in Rome, in Paris, in Amsterdam. . . . Who will be overseeing the King Foundation now? Aunt Alida will need help. And that enormous English Tudor house. And all that property: thirty acres. Uncle Gardner refused even to consider selling to a developer, but it's futile to hold out much longer. All of the north section of Contracoeur is being developed; if Aunt Alida doesn't sell, she'll be surrounded by tract homes in a few years. It's the way of the future, obviously." Alastor paused, sighing with satisfaction. It seemed clear that the future was a warm beneficent breeze blowing in his direction. He gave Lyle, who was hunched behind the steering wheel of his nondescript automobile, a sly sidelong glance. "And that magnificent Rolls Royce. I suppose, Brother, you have your eye on *that?*" Alastor laughed, as if nothing was more amusing than the association of Lyle with a Rolls Royce. He was dabbing at his flushed face, overheated from numerous glasses of wine.

Quietly Lyle said, "I think you should leave the family alone, Alastor. You've already done enough damage to innocent people in your life."

"But—by what measure is 'enough'?" Alastor said, with mock seriousness. "By your measure, Brother, or mine?"

"There is only one measure—that of common decency."

"Oh well, then, if you're going to lapse into 'common' decency," Alastor said genially, "it's hopeless to try to talk to you."

At the Black River Inn, Alastor invited Lyle inside so that they could discuss "family matters" in more detail. Lyle, trembling with indignation, coolly declined. He had work to do, he said; he was in the midst of designing a book, a new limited edition with handsewn pages and letterpress printing, of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "William Wilson." Alastor shrugged, as if he thought little of this; not once had he shown the slightest interest in his brother's beautifully designed books, any more than he'd shown interest in his brother's life. "You'd be better off meeting a woman," he said. "I could introduce you to one."

Lyle said, startled, "But you've only just arrived back in Contracoeur."

Alastor laughed, laying a heavy hand on Lyle's arm, and squeezing him with what seemed like affection. "God, Lyle! Are you serious? Women are everywhere. And any time."

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Lyle said disdainfully, "A certain kind of woman, you mean."

Alastor said, with equal disdain, "No. There is only one kind of woman."

Lyle turned his car into the drive of the Black River Inn, his heart pounding with loathing of his brother. He knew that Alastor spoke carelessly, meaning only to provoke; it was pointless to try to speak seriously with him, let alone reason with him. He had no conscience in small matters as in large. *What of our cousin Susan? Do you ever think of her, do you feel remorse for what you did to her?*—Lyle didn't dare ask. He would only be answered by a crude, flippant remark which would upset him further.

The Black River Inn was a handsome "historic" hotel recently renovated, at considerable cost, now rather more a resort motel than an inn, with landscaped grounds, a luxurious swimming pool, tennis courts. It seemed appropriate that Alastor would be staying in such a place; though surely deep in debt, he was accustomed to first-rate accommodations. Lyle sat in his car watching his brother stride purposefully away without a backward glance. Already he'd forgotten his chauffeur.

Two attractive young women were emerging from the front entrance of the inn as Alastor approached. Their expressions when they saw him—alert, enlivened—the swift exchange of smiles, as if in a secret code—cut Lyle to the quick. *Don't you know that man is evil? How can you be so easily deceived by looks?* Lyle opened his car door, jumped from the car, stood breathless and staring at the young women as they continued on the walk in his direction; they were laughing together, one of them glanced over her shoulder after Alastor (who was glancing over his shoulder at her, as he pushed into the hotel's revolving door) but their smiles faded when they saw Lyle. He wanted to stammer—what? Words of warning, or apology? Apology for his own odd behavior? But without slowing their stride the women were past, their glances sliding over Lyle; taking him in, assessing him, and sliding over him. They seemed not to register that Alastor, who'd so caught their eye, and Lyle were twins; they seemed not to have seen Lyle at all.

Recalling how years ago in circumstances long since forgotten he'd had the opportunity to observe his brother flirting with a cocktail waitress, a heavily made-up woman in her late thirties, still a glamorous woman yet no longer young, and Alastor had drawn

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her out, asking her name, teasing her, shamelessly flattering her, making her blush with pleasure; then drawing back with a look of offended surprise when the waitress asked him his name, saying, "Excuse me? I don't believe that's any of your business, miss." The hurt, baffled look on the woman's face! Lyle saw how, for a beat, she continued to smile, if only with her mouth; wanting to believe that this was part of Alastor's sophisticated banter. Alastor said, witheringly, "You don't seem to take your job seriously. I think I must have a conversation with the manager." Alastor was on his feet, incensed; the waitress immediately apologized, "Oh no, sir, please—I'm so sorry—I misunderstood—" Like an actor secure in his role since he has played it numberless times, Alastor walked away without a backward glance. It was left to Lyle (afterward, Lyle would realize how deliberately it had been left to him) to pay for his brother's drinks, and to apologize to the stunned waitress, who was still staring after Alastor. "My brother is only joking, he has a cruel sense of humor. Don't be upset, please!" But the woman seemed scarcely to hear Lyle, her eyes swimming with tears; nor did she do more than glance at him. There she stood, clutching her hands at her breasts as if she'd been stabbed, staring after Alastor, waiting for him to return.

It would be cream of *Amanita phalloides* soup that Lyle served to his brother Alastor when, at last, Alastor found time to come to lunch.

An unpracticed cook, Lyle spent much of the morning preparing the elaborate meal. The soft, rather slimy, strangely cool pale-gray-pulpy fungi chopped with onions and moderately ground in a blender. Cooked slowly in a double boiler in chicken stock, seasoned with salt and pepper and grated nutmeg; just before Alastor was scheduled to arrive, laced with heavy cream and two egg yolks slightly beaten, and the heat on the stove turned down. How delicious the soup smelled! Lyle's mouth watered, even as a vein pounded dangerously in his forehead. When Alastor arrived in a taxi, a half-hour late, swaggering into Lyle's house without knocking, he drew a deep startled breath, savoring the rich cooking aroma, and rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Lyle, wonderful! I didn't know you were a serious cook. I'm famished."

Nervously Lyle said, "But you'll have a drink first, Alastor? And—relax?"

Of course Alastor would have a drink. Or two. Already he'd dis-

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covered, chilling in Lyle's refrigerator, the two bottles of good Italian chardonnay Lyle had purchased for this occasion. "May I help myself? You're busy."

Lyle had found the recipe for cream of mushroom soup in a battered Fanny Farmer cookbook in a secondhand bookshop in town. In the same shop he'd found an amateur's guide to fungi, edible and inedible, with pages of illustrations. Shabby mane, chanterelles, beefsteak mushrooms—these were famously edible. But there amid the inedible, the sinister look-alike toadstools, was *Amanita phalloides*. The death cup. A white-spored fungi, as the caption explained, with the volva separate from the cap. Highly poisonous. And strangely beautiful, like a vision from the deepest recesses of one's dreams brought suddenly into the light.

The "phallic" nature of the fungi was painfully self-evident. How ironic, Lyle thought, and appropriate. For a man like Alastor who sexually misused women.

It had taken Lyle several days of frantic searching in the woods back beyond his house before he located what appeared to be *Amanita phalloides*. He'd drawn in his breath at the sight—a malevolent little crop of toadstools luminous in the mist, amid the snaky gnarled roots of a gigantic beech tree. Almost, as Lyle quickly gathered them with his gloved hands, dropping them into a bag, the fungi exuded an air of sentient life. Lyle imagined he could hear faint cries of anguish as he plucked at them, in haste; he had an unreasonable fear of someone discovering him. *But those aren't edible mushrooms, those are death cups, why are you gathering those?*

Alastor was seated at the plain wooden table in Lyle's spartan dining room. Lyle brought his soup bowl in from the kitchen and set it, steaming, before him. At once Alastor picked up his soup spoon and began noisily to eat. He said he hadn't eaten yet that day; he'd had an arduous night—"well into the morning." He laughed, mysteriously. He sighed. "Brother, this *is* good. I think I can discern—chanterelles? My favorites."

Lyle served crusty French bread, butter, a chunk of goat's cheese, and set a second bottle of chardonnay close by Alastor's place. He watched, mesmerized, as Alastor lifted spoonfuls of soup to his mouth and sipped and swallowed hungrily, making sounds of satisfaction. How flattered Lyle felt, who could not recall ever having been praised by his twin brother before in his life. Lyle sat tentatively at his place, fumbling with icy fingers to pick up his

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soup spoon. He'd prepared for himself soup that closely resembled Alastor's but was in fact Campbell's cream of mushroom slightly altered. This had never been a favorite of Lyle's and he ate it now slowly, his eyes on his brother; he would have wished to match Alastor spoon for spoon, but Alastor as always ate too swiftly. The tiny, near-invisible capillaries in his cheeks glowed like incandescent wires; his steely blue eyes shone with pleasure. *A man who enjoys life, where's the harm in that?*

Within minutes Alastor finished his large deep bowl of steaming hot creamy soup, licking his lips. Lyle promptly served him another. "You have more talent, Brother, than you know," Alastor said with a wink. "We might open a restaurant together: I, the keeper of the books; you, the master of the kitchen." Lyle almost spilled a spoonful of soup as he lifted it tremulously to his lips. He was waiting for *Amanita phalloides* to take effect. He'd had the idea that the poison was nearly instantaneous, like cyanide. Evidently not. Or had—the possibility filled him with horror—boiling the chopped-up toadstool diluted its toxin? He was eating sloppily, continually wiping at his chin with a napkin. Fortunately Alastor didn't notice. Alastor was absorbed in recounting, as he sipped soup, swallowed large mouthfuls of bread, butter, and cheese, and the tart white wine, a lengthy lewd tale of the woman, or women, with whom he'd spent his arduous night at the Black River Inn. He'd considered calling Lyle to insist that Lyle come join him—"As you'd done that other time, eh? To celebrate our twenty-first birthday?" Lyle blinked at him as if not comprehending his words, let alone his meaning. Alastor went on to speak of women generally. "They'll devour you alive if you allow it. They're vampires." Lyle said, fumblingly, "Yes, Alastor, I suppose so. If you say so." "Like Mother, who sucked life out of poor Father. To give birth to *us*—imagine!" Alastor shook his head, laughing. Lyle nodded gravely, numbly; yes, he would try to imagine. Alastor said, with an air almost of bitterness, though he was eating and drinking with as much appetite as before, "Yes, Brother, a man has to be vigilant. Has to make the first strike." He brooded, as if recalling more than one sorry episode. Lyle had a sudden unexpected sense of his brother with a history of true feeling, regret. Remorse? It was mildly astonishing, like seeing a figure on a playing card stir into life.

Lyle said, "But what of—Susan?"

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"Susan?—who?" The steely blue eyes, lightly threaded with red, were fixed innocently upon Lyle.

"Our cousin Susan."

"Her? But I thought—" Alastor broke off in mid sentence. His words simply ended. He was busying himself swiping at the inside of his soup bowl with a piece of crusty bread. A tinge of apparent pain made his jowls quiver and he pressed the heel of a hand against his midriff. A gas pain, perhaps.

Lyle said ironically, "Did you think Susan was dead, Alastor? Is that how you remember her?"

"I don't in fact remember her at all." Alastor spoke blithely, indifferently. A mottled flush had risen from his throat into his cheeks. "The girl was your friend, Brother. Not mine."

"No. Susan was never my friend again," Lyle said bitterly. "She never spoke to me, or answered any call or letter of mine, again. After . . . what happened."

Alastor snorted in derision. "Typical!"

" 'Typical'—?"

"Female fickleness. It's congenital."

"Our cousin Susan was not a fickle woman. You must know that, Alastor, damn you!"

"Why damn *me*? What have I to do with it? I was a boy then, hardly more than a boy, and you—so were *you*." Alastor spoke with his usual rapid ease, smiling, gesturing, as if what he said made perfect sense; he was accustomed to the company of uncritical admirers. Yet he'd begun to breathe audibly; perspiration had broken out on his unlined forehead in an oily glisten. His artfully dyed and crimped hair that looked so striking in other settings looked here, to Lyle's eye, like a wig set upon a mannequin's head. And there was an undertone of impatience, even anger, in Alastor's speech. "Look, she did get married and move away—didn't she? She did—I mean didn't—have a baby?"

Lyle stared at Alastor for a long somber moment.

"So far as I know, she did not. Have a baby."

"Well, then!" Alastor made an airy gesture of dismissal, and dabbed at his forehead with a napkin.

Seeing that Alastor's soup bowl was again empty, Lyle rose silently and carried it back into the kitchen and a third time ladled soup into it, nearly to the brim. This was the end of the cream of *Amanita phalloides* soup. Surely, now, within the next few minutes, the powerful poison would begin to act! When Lyle

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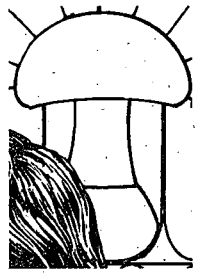
returned to the dining room with the bowl, he saw Alastor draining his second or third glass of the tart white wine and replenishing it without waiting for his host's invitation. His expression had turned mean, grim; as soon as Lyle reappeared, however, Alastor smiled up at him, and winked. "Thanks, Brother!" Yet there was an air of absolute complacency in Alastor as in one accustomed to being served by others.



Incredibly, considering all he'd already eaten, Alastor again picked up his spoon and enthusiastically ate.

So the luncheon, planned so obsessively by Lyle, passed in a blur, a confused dream. Lyle stared at his handsome ruddy-faced twin, who spoke with patronizing affection of their aunt Alida—"A befuddled old woman who clearly needs guidance"; and of the King Foundation—"An anachronism that needs total restructuring, top to bottom"; and the thirty acres of prime real estate—"The strategy must be to pit developers against one another, I've tried to explain"; and of the vagaries of the international art market—"All that's required for one thousand percent profits is a strong capital base to withstand dips in the economy." Lyle could scarcely hear for the roaring in his ears. What had gone wrong? He had mistaken an ordinary, harmless, edible mushroom for *Amanita phalloides*, the death cup? He'd been so eager and agitated out there in the woods, he hadn't been absolutely certain of the identification.

Numbed, in a trance, Lyle drove Alastor back to the Black River Inn. It was a brilliant summer day. A sky of blank blue, the scales of the dark river glittering. Alastor invited Lyle to visit him at the inn sometime soon, they could go swimming in the pool—"You meet extremely interesting people, sometimes, in such places." Lyle asked Alastor how long he intended to stay there and Alastor smiled enigmatically and said, "As long as required, Brother. You know me!"

At the inn, Alastor shook Lyle's hand vigorously, and, on an impulse, or with the pretense of acting on impulse, leaned over to kiss his cheek! Lyle was as startled as if he'd been slapped.

Driving away he felt mortified, yet in a way relieved. *It hasn't happened yet. I am not a fratricide, yet.*

Gardner King's will was read. It was a massive document enumerating over one hundred beneficiaries, individuals and organiza-

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tions. Lyle, who hadn't wished to be present at the reading, heard of the bequest made to him from his brother Alastor, who had apparently escorted Aunt Alida to the attorney's office. Lyle was to receive several thousand dollars, plus a number of his uncle's rare first-edition books. With forced ebullience Alastor said, "Congratulations, Brother! You must have played your cards right, for once." Lyle wiped at his eyes; he'd genuinely loved their uncle Gardner, and was touched to be remembered by him in his will; even as he'd expected to be remembered, to about that degree. *Yes and there's greater pleasure in the news, if Alastor has received nothing.* At the other end of the line Alastor waited, breathing into the receiver. Waiting for—what? For Lyle to ask him how he'd fared? For Lyle to offer to share the bequest with him? Alastor was saying drily, "Uncle Gardner left me just a legal form, 'forgiving' me my debts." He went on to complain that he hadn't even remembered he owed their uncle money; you would think, wouldn't you, with his staff of financial advisors, Gardner King could have reminded him; it should have been his responsibility, to remind him; Alastor swore he'd never been reminded—not once in six years. Vividly Lyle could imagine his brother's blue glaring eyes, his coarse, flushed face, and the clenched self-righteous set of his jaws. Alastor said, hurt, "I suppose I should be grateful for being 'forgiven,' Lyle, eh? It's so wonderfully Christian." Lyle said coolly, "Yes. It is Christian. I would be grateful, in your place."

"In my place, Brother, how would you know what you would be? You're 'Lyle' not 'Alastor.' Don't give yourself airs."

Rudely, Alastor hung up. Lyle winced as if his brother had poked him in the chest as so frequently he'd done when they were growing up together, as a kind of exclamation mark to a belligerent statement of his.

Only afterward did Lyle realize, with a sick stab of resentment, that, in erasing Alastor's debt to him, which was surely beyond $10,000, their uncle had in fact given Alastor the money; and it was roughly the equivalent of the amount he'd left Lyle in his will. *As if, in his uncle's mind, Alastor and he were of equal merit after all.*

She came to him when he summoned her. Knocking stealthily at his door in the still, private hour beyond midnight. And hearing him murmur *Come in!* and inside in the shadows he stood watching. How she trembled, how excited and flattered she was. Her

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girlish face, her rather too large hands and feet, a braid of golden-red hair wrapped around her head. In her uniform that fitted her young shapely body so becomingly. In a patch of caressing moonlight. Noiselessly he came behind her to secure the door, lock and double-lock it. He made her shiver kissing her hand, and the soft flesh at the inside of her elbow. So she laughed, startled. He was European, she'd been led to believe. A European gentleman. Accepting the first drink from him, a toast to mutual happiness. Accepting the second drink, her head giddy. How flattered by his praise *Beautiful girl! Lovely girl!* And: *Remove your clothes please.* Fumbling with the tiny buttons of the violet rayon uniform. Wide lace collar, lace cuffs. He kissed her throat, a vein in her throat. Kissed the warm cleft between her breasts. *Lee Ann is it? Lynette?* In their loveplay on the king-sized bed he twisted her wrist just slightly. Just enough for her to laugh, startled; to register discomfort; yet not so emphatically she would realize he meant anything by it. *Here, Lynette. Give me a real kiss.* Boldly pressing her fleshy mouth against his and her heavy breasts against his chest and he bit her lips, hard; she recoiled from him, and still his teeth were clamped over her lips that were livid now with pain. When at last he released her she was sobbing and her lips were bleeding and he, the European gentleman, with genuine regret crying *Oh what did I do!—forgive me, I was carried away by passion, my darling.* She cringed before him on her hands and knees, her breasts swinging. Her enormous eyes. Shining like a beast's. And wanting still to believe, how desperate to believe, so within a few minutes she allowed herself to be persuaded it had been an accident, an accident of passion, an accident for which she was herself to blame, being so lovely, so desirable she'd made him crazed. Kissing her hands pleading for forgiveness and at last forgiven and tenderly he arranged her arms and legs, her head at the edge of the bed, her long wavy somewhat coarse golden-red hair undone from its braid hanging over onto the carpet. She would have screamed except he provided a rag to shove into her mouth, one in fact used for previous visitors in Suite 181 of the Black River Inn.

"How can you be so cruel, Alastor!"

Laughing, Alastor had recounted this lurid story for his brother Lyle as the two sat beside the hotel pool in the balmy dusk of an evening in late June. Lyle had listened with mounting dismay and

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disgust and at last cried out. Alastor said carelessly, " 'Cruel'?—why am I 'cruel'? The women love it, Brother. Believe me."

Lyle felt ill. Not knowing whether to believe Alastor or not—wondering if perhaps the entire story had been fabricated, to shock.

Yet there was something matter-of-fact in Alastor's tone that made Lyle think, yes, it's true. He wished he'd never dropped by the Black River Inn to visit with Alastor, as Alastor had insisted. And he would not have wished to acknowledge even to himself that Alastor's crude story had stirred him sexually.

I am falling into pieces, shreds. Like something brittle that has been cracked.

The day after the luncheon, Lyle had returned to the woods behind his house to look for the mysterious fungi; but he had no luck retracing his steps, and failed even to locate the gigantic beech tree with the snaky exposed roots. In a rage he'd thrown away *The Amateur's Guide to Fungi Edible & Inedible.* He'd thrown away *The Fanny Farmer Cookbook.*

Since the failure of the *Amanita phalloides* soup, Lyle found himself thinking obsessively of his brother. As soon as he woke in the morning he began to think of Alastor, and through the long day he thought of Alastor; at night his dreams were mocking, jeering, turbulent with emotion that left him enervated and depressed. It was no longer possible for him to work even on projects, like the book design for Poe's "William Wilson," that challenged his imagination. Though he loved his hometown, and his life here, he wondered despairingly if perhaps he should move away from Contracoeur for hadn't Contracoeur been poisoned for him by Alastor's presence? Living here, with Alastor less than ten minutes away by car, Lyle had no freedom from thinking of his evil brother. For rumors circulated that Alastor was meeting with local real estate developers though Gardner King's widow was still insisting that her property would remain intact as her husband had wished; that Alastor was to be the next director of the King Foundation, though the present director was a highly capable man who'd had his position for years and was universally respected; that Alastor and his aunt Alida were to travel to Europe in the fall on an art-purchasing expedition, though Alida King had always expressed a nervous dislike, even a terror, of travel, and had grown frail since her husband's death. It had been recounted to Lyle by a cousin that poor Alida had said, wringing her hands, "Oh, I do hope I won't be traveling to Europe this fall, I

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know I won't survive away from Contracoeur!" and when the cousin asked why on earth she might be traveling to Europe if she didn't wish to, Alida had said, starting to cry, "But I may decide that I do wish to travel, that's what frightens me. I know I will never return alive."

Cocktail service at poolside had ended at 9 P.M.; the pool was officially closed, though its glimmering synthetic-aqua water was still illuminated from below; only boastful Alastor and his somber brother Lyle remained in deck chairs, as an eroded-looking but glaring bright moon rose in the night sky. Alastor, in swim trunks and a terry cloth shirt, trotted off barefoot for another drink, and Lyle, looking after him, felt a childish impulse to flee while his brother was in the cocktail lounge. He was sickened by the story he'd been told; knowing himself sullied as if he'd been present in Alastor's suite the previous night. As if, merely hearing such obscenities, he was an accomplice of Alastor's. *And perhaps somehow in fact he'd been there, helping to hold the struggling girl down, helping to thrust the gag into her mouth.*

Alastor returned with a fresh drink. He was eyeing Lyle with a look of bemusement as he'd done so often when they were boys, gauging to what extent he'd shocked Lyle or embarrassed him. After their father's death, for instance, when the brothers were eight years old, Lyle had wept for days; Alastor had ridiculed his grief, saying that if you believed in God (and weren't they all supposed to believe in God?) you believed that everything was ordained; if you were a good Christian, you believed that their father was safe and happy in heaven—"So why bawl like a baby?"

Why, indeed?

Alastor was drunker than Lyle had known. He said commandingly, his voice slurred, "Midnight swim. Brother, c'mon!"

Lyle merely laughed uneasily. He was fully dressed; hadn't brought swim trunks; couldn't imagine swimming companionably with his brother, even as adults; he who'd been so tormented by Alastor when they were children, tugged and pummeled in the water, his head held under until he gasped and sputtered in panic. *Your brother's only playing, Lyle. Don't cry. Alastor, be good!*

Enlivened by drink, Alastor threw off his shirt and announced that he was going swimming, and no one could stop him. Lyle said, "But the pool is closed, Alastor"—as if that would make any difference. Alastor laughed, swaggering to the edge of the pool to dive. Lyle saw with reluctant admiration and a tinge of jealousy

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that his brother's body, unlike his own, was solid, hard-packed; though there was a loose bunch of flesh at his waist, and his stomach had begun to protrude, his shoulders and thighs were taut with muscle. A pelt of fine glistening hairs covered much of his body and curled across his chest; the nipples of his breasts were purply-dark, distinct as small staring eyes. Alastor's head, held high with exaggerated bravado as he flexed his knees, positioning himself to dive, was an undeniably handsome head; Alastor looked like a film star of another era, a man accustomed to the uncritical adoration of women and the envy of men. The thought flashed through Lyle like a knifeblade *It's my moral obligation to destroy this man, because he is evil; and because there is no one else to destroy him but me.*

With the showy ebullience of a twelve-year-old boy, Alastor dived into the pool at the deep end; a less-than-perfect dive that must have embarrassed him, with Lyle as a witness; Lyle who winced feeling the harsh slap of the water, like a retributive hand, against his own chest and stomach. Like a deranged seal, Alastor surfaced noisily, blowing water out of his nose, snorting; as he began to swim in short, choppy, angry-looking strokes, not nearly so coordinated as Lyle would have expected, Lyle felt his own arm and leg muscles strain in involuntary sympathy. How alone they were, Lyle and his twin brother Alastor! Overhead the marred moon glared like a light in an examination room.

Lyle thought *I could strike him on the head with—what?* One of the deck chairs, a small wrought-iron table caught his eye. And even as this thought struck Lyle, Alastor in the pool began to flail about; began coughing, choking; he must have inhaled water and swallowed it; drunker than he knew, in no condition to be swimming in water over his head. As Lyle stood at the edge of the pool staring he saw his brother begin to sink. And there was no one near! No witness save Lyle himself! Inside the inn, at a distance of perhaps one hundred feet, there was a murmur and buzz of voices, laughter, music; every hotel window facing the open courtyard and the pool area was veiled by a drape or a blind; most of the windows were probably shut tight, and the room air conditioners on. No one would hear Alastor cry for help even if Alastor could cry for help. Excited, clenching his fists, Lyle ran to the other side of the pool to more closely observe his brother, now a helpless, thrashing body sunk beneath the surface of the water like a weighted sack. A trail of bubbles lifted from his distorted

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mouth; his dyed hair too lifted, like seaweed. How silent was Alastor's deathly struggle, and how lurid the bright aqua water with its theatrical lights from beneath. Lyle was panting like a dog, crouched at the edge of the pool, muttering, "Die! Drown! Damn your soul to hell! You don't deserve to live!"

The next moment, Lyle had kicked off his shoes, torn his shirt off over his head, and dived into the water to save Alastor. With no time to think, he grabbed at the struggling man, overpowered him, hauled him to the surface; he managed to get Alastor's head in a hammerlock and swim with him into the shallow end of the pool; managed to lift him, a near-dead weight, a dense body streaming water, onto the tile. Alastor thrashed about like a beached seal, gasping for breath; he vomited, coughed, and choked, spitting up water and clots of food. Lyle crouched over him, panting, as Alastor rolled onto his back, his hair in absurd strings about his face and his face now bloated and puffy, no longer a handsome face, as if in fact he'd drowned. His breath was erratic, heaving. His eyes rolled in his head. Yet he saw Lyle, and must have recognized him. "Oh God, Lyle, w-what happened?" he managed to say.

"You were drunk, drowning. I pulled you out."

Lyle spoke bitterly. He too was streaming water; his clothes were soaked; he felt like a fool, a dupe. Never, never would he comprehend what he'd done. Alastor, deathly pale, weak and stricken still with the terror of death, not hearing the tone of Lyle's voice or seeing the expression of impotent fury on Lyle's face, reached out with childlike pleading to clutch at Lyle's hand.

"Brother, thank you!"

The world is a beautiful place if you have the eyes to see it and the ears to hear it.

Was this so? Could it be so? Lyle would have to live as if it were, for his brother Alastor could not be killed. Evidently. Or in any case, Lyle was not the man to kill him.

A week after he'd saved Alastor from drowning, on a radiantly sunny July morning when Lyle was seated disconsolately at his workbench, a dozen rejected drawings for "William Wilson" scattered and crumpled before him, the telephone rang and it was Alastor announcing that he'd decided to move after all to Aunt Alida's house—"She insists. Poor woman, she's frightened of

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'ghosts'—needs a man's presence in that enormous house. Brother, will you help me move? I have only a few things." Alastor's voice was buoyant and easy; the voice of a man perfectly at peace with himself. Lyle seemed to understand that his brother had forgotten about the near-drowning. His pride would not allow him to recall it, nor would Lyle ever bring up the subject. Lyle drew breath to say sharply, "No! Move yourself, damn you," but instead he said, "Oh, I suppose so. When?" Alastor said, "Within the hour, if possible. And, by the way, I have a surprise for you—it's for both of us, actually. A memento from our late beloved Uncle Gardner." Lyle was too demoralized to ask what the memento was.

When he arrived at the Black River Inn, there was Alastor proudly awaiting him at the front entrance, drawing a good deal of admiring attention. A tanned, good-looking, youthful man with a beaming smile, in a pale pink-striped seersucker suit, collarless white shirt, and straw hat, a dozen or more suitcases and valises on the sidewalk; and, in the drive beneath the canopy, a gleaming-black chrome-glittering Rolls Royce. Alastor laughed heartily at the look on Lyle's face. "Some memento, eh, Brother? Aunt Alida was so sweet, she told me, 'Your uncle would want both you boys to have it. He loved you so—his favorite nephews.' "

Lyle stared at the Rolls Royce. The elegant car, vintage 1971, was as much a work of art, and culture, as a motor vehicle. Lyle had ridden in it numerous times, in his uncle's company, but he'd never driven it. Nor even fantasized driving it. "How—did it get here? How is this possible?" Lyle stammered. Alastor explained that their aunt's driver had brought the car over that morning and that Lyle should simply leave his car (so ordinary, dull, and plebian a car—a compact American model Alastor merely glanced at, with a disdainful look) in the parking lot, for the time being. "Unfortunately, I lack a valid driving license in the United States at the present time," Alastor said, "or I would drive myself. But you know how scrupulous I am about obeying the law—technically." He laughed, rubbing his hands briskly together. Still Lyle was staring at the Rolls Royce. How like the hearse that had borne his uncle's body from the funeral home to the church it was; how magnificently black, and the flawless chrome and windows so glittering, polished to perfection. Alastor poked Lyle in the ribs to wake him from his trance and passed to him, with a wink, a silver pocket flask. Pure scotch whiskey at 11 A.M. of a weekday morning?

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Lyle raised his hand to shove the flask aside but instead took it from his brother's fingers, lifted it to his lips, and drank.

And a second time, drank. Flames darted in his throat and mouth, his eyes stung with tears.

"Oh! God."

"Good, eh? Just the cure for your ridiculous anemia, Brother," Alastor said teasingly.

While Alastor settled accounts in the Black River Inn, using their aunt's credit, Lyle and an awed, smiling doorman loaded the trunk and plush rear seat of the Rolls with Alastor's belongings. The sun was vertiginously warm and the scotch whiskey had gone to Lyle's head and he was perspiring inside his clothes, murmuring to himself and laughing. *The world is a beautiful place. Is a beautiful place. A beautiful place.* Among Alastor's belongings were several handsome new garment bags crammed, apparently, with clothing. There were suitcases of unusual heaviness that might have been crammed with—what? Statuary? There were several small canvases (oil paintings?) wrapped hastily in canvas and secured with adhesive tape; there was a heavy sports valise with a broken lock, inside which Lyle discovered, carelessly wrapped in what appeared to be women's silk underwear, loose jewelry of all kinds—gold chains, strings of pearls jumbled together, a silver pendant with a sparkling red ruby, bracelets and earrings and a single brass candlestick holder and even a woman's high-heeled slipper, stained (bloodstained?) white satin with a carved mother-of-pearl ornament. Lyle stared, breathless. What a treasure trove! Once, he would have been morbidly suspicious of his brother, suspecting him of theft—and worse. Now he merely smiled, and shrugged.

By the time Lyle and the doorman had loaded the Rolls, Alastor emerged from the inn, slipping on a pair of dark glasses. By chance—it must have been chance—a striking blond woman was walking with him, smiling, chatting, clearly quite impressed by him—a beautiful woman of about forty with a lynx face, a bold red mouth, and diamond earrings, who paused to scribble something (telephone number? address?) on a card and slip it into a pocket of Alastor's seersucker coat.

Exuberantly Alastor cried, "Brother, let's go! Across the river and to Aunt Alida's—to our destiny."

Like a man in a dream Lyle took his place behind the wheel of the Rolls; Alastor climbed in beside him. Lyle's heart was beating

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painfully, with an almost erotic excitement. Neither brother troubled to fasten his seat belt; Lyle, who'd perhaps never once driven any vehicle without fastening his seat belt first, seemed not to think of doing so now as if, simply by sliding into this magnificent car, he'd entered a dimension in which old, tedious rules no longer applied. Lyle was grateful for Alastor passing him the silver flask, for he needed a spurt of strength and courage. He drank thirstily, in small choking swallows: how the whiskey burned, warmly glowed, going down! Lyle switched on the ignition, startled at how readily, how quietly, the engine turned over. Yes, this was magic. He was driving his uncle Gardner King's Rolls Royce as if it were his own; as he turned out of the hotel drive, he saw the driver of an incoming vehicle staring at the car, and at him, with frank envy.

And now on the road. In brilliant sunshine, and not much traffic. The Rolls resembled a small, perfect yacht; a yacht moving without evident exertion along a smooth, swiftly running stream. What a thrill, to be entrusted with this remarkable car; what sensuous delight in the sight, touch, smell of the Rolls! Why had he, Lyle King, been a puritan all of his life? What a blind, smug fool to be living in a world of luxury items and taking no interest in them; as if there were virtue in asceticism; in mere ignorance. Driving the Rolls on the highway in the direction of the High Street Bridge, where they would cross the Black River into the northern, affluent area of Contracoeur in which their aunt lived, Lyle felt intoxicated as one singled out for a special destiny. He wanted to shout out the car window *Look! Look at me! This is the first morning of the first day of my new life.*

Not once since Alastor's call that morning had Lyle thought of—what? What had it been? The death-cup mushroom, what was its Latin name? At last, to Lyle's relief, he'd forgotten.

Alastor sipped from the pocket flask as he reminisced, tenderly, of the old Contracoeur world of their childhood. That world, that had seemed so stable, so permanent, was rapidly passing now, vanishing into a newer America. Soon, all of the older generation of Kings would be deceased. "Remember when we were boys, Lyle? What happy times we had? I admit, I was a bit of a bastard, sometimes—I apologize. Truly. It's just that I resented you, you know. My twin brother." His voice was caressing yet lightly ironic.

"Resented me? Why?" Lyle laughed, the possibility seemed so far-fetched.

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"Because you were born on my birthday, of course. Obviously, I was cheated of presents."

Driving the daunting, unfamiliar car, that seemed to him higher built than he'd recalled, Lyle was sitting stiffly forward, gripping the elegant mahogany steering wheel and squinting through the windshield as if he was having difficulty seeing. The car's powerful engine vibrated almost imperceptibly, like the coursing of his own heated blood. Laughing, though slightly anxious, he said, "But, Alastor, you wouldn't have wished me not to have been born, would you? For the sake of some presents?"

An awkward silence ensued. Alastor was contemplating how to reply when the accident occurred.

Approaching the steep ramp of the High Street Bridge, Lyle seemed for a moment to lose the focus of his vision, and jammed down hard on the brake pedal; except it wasn't the brake pedal but the accelerator. A diesel truck crossing the bridge, belching smoke, seemed then to emerge out of nowhere as out of a tunnel. Lyle hadn't seen the truck until, with terrifying speed, the Rolls careened up the ramp and into the truck's oncoming grille. There was a sound of brakes, shouts, a scream, and as truck and car collided, a sickening wrenching of metal and a shattering of glass. Together the vehicles tumbled from the ramp, through a low guardrail, and onto an embankment; there was an explosion, flames; the last thing Lyle knew, he and his shrieking brother were being flung forward into a fiery-black oblivion.

Though badly injured, the driver of the diesel truck managed to crawl free of the flaming wreckage; the occupants of the Rolls Royce were trapped inside their smashed vehicle, and may have been killed on impact. After the fire was extinguished, emergency medical workers would discover in the wreckage the charred remains of two Caucasian males of approximately the same height and age; so badly mangled, crushed, burned, they were never to be precisely identified. As if the bodies had been flung together from a great height, or at a great speed, they seemed to be but a single body, hideously conjoined. It was known that the remains were those of the King brothers, Alastor and Lyle, fraternal twins who would have been thirty-eight years old on the following Sunday. But which body was which, whose charred organs, bones, blood had belonged to which brother, no forensic specialist would ever determine. ●

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Hole in Two

by Ralph McInerny

The professor's coat was found hanging in his closet with him still in it. The blood that had drained from a gash on his leg formed a pool on the floor beneath his spiked shoes.

"Spiked?" Detective Caspar asked.

"Golf shoes." The medical examiner's manner gave no indication that he found the scene unusual.

"Why would he be wearing golf shoes?"

"Why would he be hanging in the closet?"

"You're ruling out suicide?" If Wicket wanted to be a smartass, Caspar would trump him.

The corners of the M.E.'s mouth twitched. "For now."

If Professor Moore had opened the great artery in his leg, it would have been before someone decided to shoot him in the head and suspend him from a hook in the closet of his office like a pig being prepared for butchering. In between blubbering, the widow was laying newspapers along the route from the front door to the professor's study so her carpet wouldn't be ruined.

"It was just cleaned," she whined.

Caspar had noticed before how the bereaved seek solace in distractions, in things having nothing to do with their loss. His own reaction to Wicket's remark about the shoes was delayed.

"Golf shoes?"

Like a blacksmith about to shoe a horse, Wicket lifted one professorial foot and revealed its spiked sole. Grass formed little

In fall of 1997 Ralph McInerny fans will be able to obtain the debut book in a new series of mystery novels set at Notre Dame University, *Upon This Rockne* (St. Martin's Press). The novel, like this new story for *EQMM*, follows the adventures of an assemblage of eccentric, and sometimes deadly, academics. ¶

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ringlets around the spikes. Wicket cleaned one spike and held the circle of grass to his nose and sniffed delicately.

"Smells fresh." But Caspar was way ahead of him. The university golf course was visible from the window of Professor Moore's study. He went into the kitchen and, not finding the widow, picked up the phone and called the clubhouse.

"Professor Moore golf today?"

"If you can call it that."

"Who'm I talking to?"

"I was going to ask you the same question."

Caspar still felt pride whenever he identified himself as a city detective. After three years of taking tests and passing physicals and coming up short, he had gotten onto the force by accident five years before. The physical was waived and he was hired before it was discovered he was only five foot six.

"What's up?"

"You were going to give me your name."

A long pause during which Caspar listened to the muted sounds of the golf shop.

"Skinner. I'm the assistant pro."

"Something has happened to Professor Moore. I'm told he played golf earlier today."

"He's in the faculty nine-hole league and this is their day."

"You saw him?"

"What is this?"

"I'm coming over," Caspar said. He went back to the study to tell Wicket.

"Gonna shoot a little golf?" Wicket asked.

"I'm gonna find out who shot a golfer."

Skinner came out of a back room and looked over a glass counter at Caspar, who reminded him why he was here.

"Please don't call him a golfer," Skinner said, wincing.

"That bad?"

"He boasted that he had never had a lesson in his life. That was obvious. But the worst thing was, he couldn't shut up."

"Talked a lot?"

"Incessantly. He even talked when *he* was shooting. I'm surprised no one's killed him."

"Someone has."

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Skinner stepped back, wearing a half grin, studying Caspar. "You're serious."

"I'm serious. He was found dead in his study."

"His study?" Relief broke out like sweat on Skinner's face. He exhaled theatrically. "Thank God it didn't happen here."

"Maybe it did."

"You said he was found in his study."

"But still wearing golf shoes. And hung up in the closet."

"I don't get it."

"Do you have the schedule for the nine-hole group?"

Skinner put it on the counter between them, laying it east and west to their north and south, so it was equally inconvenient to read from either side of the counter.

Professor Barlow Moore was scheduled to play the back nine with his partner Ploose and two faculty men, Dexter and Gooch.

"One man," Skinner corrected. "Gooch is a woman."

"It says four-thirty."

Skinner nodded. It was now 4:25. "They always rearrange their tee times. People in administration want to get out of the office, and the faculty never work, so they're free as the breeze. And I'd rather have them get it over with early so we can start repairing the course."

Caspar asked Skinner if there was a phone other than that hanging on the wall next to the entrance to the golf shop. He was taken into the privacy of the back room where he asked for a university telephone book.

Professor E. G. Ploose was in the mathematics department and had been Barlow Moore's golfing partner. He did not answer in his office and the departmental secretary said he was gone for the day. Caspar asked for his home number.

"I don't usually give out home numbers."

"This is the police."

"The police!"

"Did Professor Ploose leave early today in order to golf?"

"Yes. Yes, he did."

She gave him Ploose's home phone number. The man who answered sounded half asleep. It was Ploose.

"When did you finish playing golf?"

"Is that you, Barlow? We didn't play. They were quite put out that you didn't show, and I offered to forfeit but Gooch said no, they'd forfeit. You have something on her, Barlow?"

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"This is Detective Caspar. Professor Moore has met with an accident."

"I knew it! I warned him."

Caspar told Ploose that someone would be around to see him later.

"What kind of accident was it?"

"Tell you when we get there."

As he hung up, a silver-haired man in a running suit came in by the back door of the golf shop and glared at Caspar.

"What the hell are you doing back here?"

Skinner came to the rescue. The silver-haired man was Bennie Barth, golf coach and manager of the university course.

"Something's happened to Moore," Skinner said, unable to keep a burble of delight from his voice.

"I still don't see why you're using that phone," Barth said.

Caspar explained that he was anxious to talk with those who had last seen the unfortunate Professor Moore. "I understand his match was canceled."

Bennie Barth's frown diminished only when Caspar pushed the phone away and stood.

"He probably wore himself out practicing this morning," Skinner said, in inappropriately jocular tones.

Skinner came with him when Caspar went through the golf shop and outside. "You know the saying practice makes perfect? It ain't necessarily so. Moore devoted more time to his game than anyone I know. When he played alone, he claimed to play well, but he never had witnesses to a good game. Playing alone, it wouldn't matter that he never shut up."

"Still, funny he didn't show up for his match."

Skinner shook his head. "No it isn't. Like I said, he played this morning. Latched on to Barth. He shot a hole in one."

"Isn't that hard?"

"For Moore it's impossible. But he did it. He let out a roar and jumped into the cart and came weaving back here, shouting at the top of his lungs about his hole in one. Barth had to walk in. If Moore had still been here, Barth would have wrapped a club around his head."

"You sure he didn't kill him?"

"Moore was gone. He came through the clubhouse, yipping and yelling and leaping into the air, and continued right on out to the parking lot."

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"What time was that?"

The time Skinner gave was close to the time Wicket guessed Moore had died. The M.E. figured Moore had been hanging in the closet for hours before he was discovered.

"Who discovered him?" Skinner asked.

"His wife."

Skinner looked surprised. "Was he married?"

"Apparently she never golfed."

"Neither did he."

Golfers seemed to be a snobbish bunch. Maybe not. It wasn't so much Moore's having been a bad golfer as his having bad golf etiquette that was held against him. Talking while others hit was an absolute no-no and wasn't diminished by the fact that Moore also talked while he himself was hitting.

"You sure Moore was out of here before Barth returned from the course?"

"Hey, Bennie finished the round. Moore's luck didn't mean Bennie had to quit. If Moore hadn't taken the cart, Bennie would have been delighted. He was rid of the course motor-mouth.

Caspar started out for the university. It sounded as if anyone who played with Moore had a motive to kill him. Ploose and the two scheduled opponents, Dexter and Gooch, had been stood up, but this could only have delighted them. Ploose's account of their forfeiting the match when it was the other team that failed to show up indicated high elation. Nonetheless, in the interest of thoroughness, Caspar followed the signs to the faculty office building. Since Gooch, a professor of art appreciation, had her office on the first floor, he stopped to see her first.

Gloria Gooch revealed herself as an object of appreciation in her own right. She wore a pink T-shirt and black shorts and half-sox. She was shoeless. She stepped back when he identified himself.

"But Willie didn't do a thing. Moore never showed up."

"Willie Dexter?"

"It was only a practical joke. I warned him it might be dangerous, practical jokes so often are, but he had made up his mind. That's why I called Mrs. Moore. I just didn't want anything to happen to Moore." She took a breath. "Not that he didn't annoy me as much as everyone else."

"Tell me about the joke."

The sixth hole was a water hole and there, whether or not he hit a ball in the lake, Moore would hop into the flat-bottomed boat

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and row around picking balls from the lake, slowing up his team and everyone behind them. Willie Dexter had drilled a hole in the bottom of the boat and filled it with a caulking guaranteed to wash away within minutes.

"By that time he figured Moore would be far from shore."

"Is it a deep lake?"

"Not more than a foot in most places."

"So what's the danger?"

"The bottom's pure muck. If Moore got out of the boat to walk to shore, God only knows what might have happened. I feared an attack."

"Heart?"

"No, that Moore would attack Willie. You know the saying, never kid a kidder? Moore could dish it out but he couldn't take it. I was worried for Willie." Her eyes dropped. "We're engaged, sort of."

"So you called Mrs. Moore?"

"Well, I tried to. I left a message on the answering machine. When he didn't show up, I figured she got it and kept him home. Anyway, I persuaded Willie that we should forfeit. Then we played alone."

"Professor Moore is dead."

She literally swooned, a graceful floating to the floor where she landed as feathers land. He was kneeling beside her when the door opened.

"What the hell are you doing?"

A hand was laid on Caspar's arm and he was forced up and back and against the wall by a huge red-faced man with blood in his eye. He was distracted by a moan from the fallen Professor Gooch. His grip on Caspar's shoulder eased and he took his place beside the fallen art appreciator.

"Gloria, are you all right?" He began to slap her cheeks.

"Hey, that hurts." Gloria Gooch sat up but at the sight of her slapper took him in her arms. "Have you heard the awful news?"

"The hole in one?"

She didn't understand. Caspar wondered how Dexter had heard of Moore's morning feat if Gooch had not. He permitted Gooch to extract an apology from Dexter for the way he had treated a bona fide representative of law and order. She added, in a half whisper, half giggle, that she had feared the police had come for him.

"For me?"

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"Well, you did intend to play an awful trick on him."

"Someone beat me to the punch."

"Killing is not a practical joke," Caspar pointed out. "Professor Gooch said the two of you played on after you forfeited. When did you finish?"

"We only played a couple of holes," Gooch said. "Willie was in such a mood at being cheated of playing his big joke."

"I had this vision of him twenty yards from shore with the boat sinking. He doesn't swim."

"That makes it pretty risky. When did you leave the golf course?"

"Before two," Gooch answered.

"Was it that early?"

"Oh you. You didn't even know what time it was, you were so mad."

"About you," he said, in a feeble attempt to get her off the subject.

"And you came here to your office?" Caspar said to Gooch.

"We came back to the faculty building together."

That would put them both in their offices at the crucial time — if Gloria Gooch could be believed, and Caspar was instinctively sure she could be.

"Where have you been, Willie?" she asked him.

"Where?"

"I called you several times, to see if you had cheered up."

"I must have stepped into the hall."

"You should have heard your phone ringing."

"You know what it's like on the third floor."

Caspar left them, and at the stairway went up to the third floor. He walked down the corridor, which was flanked by faculty offices, many of which had their doors open. Their occupants looked out eagerly when he went past, as if wanting to be interrupted in whatever they were doing. Dexter's door was closed and, as Caspar discovered when he tried it, locked.

"He isn't in."

The door across the hall had opened and an old man with wild gray hair and discolored pouches under his eyes looked out.

"Dexter hasn't been in all afternoon."

"You're sure?"

"Well, he didn't answer his phone, and in these offices you either answer it or are driven mad by the sound."

His name was Wurms and he thought Caspar was the new man in philosophy. Philosophy! Caspar was anxious to correct him but

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decided there could be an advantage to letting Wurms think he was one of them.

Dexter, Caspar learned, had fought in Vietnam and was coach of the university pistol team.

"I didn't know there was a pistol team."

"There wasn't until Dexter started it. It gives him a chance to show off his expertise."

"Is he good?"

"He is excellent." Wurms nodded in approval of what he had said. "He has medals, trophies, certificates, awards."

Moore, it transpired, had longed to become a member of the pistol team, and was not put off by the fact that it was a student team. He offered to help Dexter coach.

"He wanted a chance to shoot the new gun he'd bought. Dexter told him to join a club. He persisted."

"And Dexter persisted in putting him off?"

"Dexter could be even more stubborn and ornery than Moore."

Caspar let Wurms get back to whatever it was he had been doing. When he stopped by Gooch's office, both she and Dexter were gone.

The bullet that had made such a decisive hole in the middle of Moore's forehead came, Wicket informed Caspar a short time later, from Moore's own pistol.

"Were there prints on the weapon?"

"Moore's. But they were all but smudged off by the person who discharged it while wearing a glove."

"A glove."

"Leather things, in the shape of the human hand. They are worn for warmth and protection."

And, it occurred to Caspar, to play golf. A reluctant Skinner opened Dexter's locker for him and looked through his bag for a golf glove. There was one new one, still unwrapped, and a balled-up blue glove that, Skinner said, should be thrown away. It was no longer useable.

"You mean he wouldn't have used it today?"

Skinner looked disdainfully at the ball of blue leather. "This thing hasn't been worn for two years."

"With *his* hands?" Gooch cried, when Caspar asked her if Professor Dexter wore a golf glove. He'd finally managed to reach her at

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her office. "Of course he does. If he ever forgets his glove, he develops terrible sores and blisters."

"So he wore one today?"

"What am I telling you?"

Caspar spelled it out for Maloney from the prosecutor's office. Dexter had motive, opportunity, and the skill to drill the dreadful Moore in the middle of the brow.

"What's so hard about that?" Maloney asked.

"There are no powder burns on the corpse. The pistol must have been fired from some distance."

"You haven't found the glove?"

Caspar extended a plastic bag to Maloney. In it was the golf glove he had retrieved from Dexter's office after being admitted to it by campus security.

"Good work."

Caspar nodded. Nonchalance was everything. The taxpayer paid him to do what he had done. Why ask for applause for having done it? But inside he was doing backflips, taking bows, and giving extended interviews to the international press on how he had brought Dexter to heel.

"I only see one wrinkle," Maloney said.

"What's that?"

"A right-handed golfer wears a glove on his left hand, and vice versa. Was Dexter an ambidextrous pistol shot?"

The press conference in his imagination dispersed, his inner self regained control of itself, he stopped taking bows. Instead, an elevator with a broken cable roared down the shaft of his spirit and crashed in the basement of his soul.

"Of course, if he was an expert . . ."

When Caspar left Maloney, the prosecutor was drawing up the necessary papers. He had instructed Caspar to arrest the suspect and bring him in. Driving to the campus, Caspar tried to regain the elation the discovery of the golf glove in Dexter's office had given him. But he was filled with foreboding. At the least, they should wait until tests had been run on the glove.

He was approaching the road leading to the university golf course. He turned off when he noticed a light on in the shop. He parked and got out of his car. There was a cracking sound and Caspar dropped immediately to the ground. That had been a shot, no doubt about it. And then there was another.

Caspar got warily to his feet and zigzagged toward the golf

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shop, just in case. He could see Skinner behind the counter. Again there was the sound of a shot. Skinner didn't even wince. Caspar let himself in.

"What are those shots?"

"Oh, that's Barth. There's a makeshift range beside the practice fairway."

"Barth is shooting?"

"A gun. He and Dexter are going to go head-to-head a month from now."

"I'm going down to talk to him."

"Be careful. He wears ear covers and won't hear you coming."

The golf pro was crouched on a gravelly expanse, giving the general appearance of a coiled spring. Suddenly he moved, turned, shot, and a target twenty-five yards away was ripped by the slug. He repeated this performance several times. Caspar crept back to the golf shop.

"You talk to him?"

"He was pretty busy."

"It's like golf. You want to be good, you practice."

Caspar had a Big Mac and a strawberry shake in a solid condition. He ate it with a spoon. To say that he was undecided would have been an understatement. Just when his confidence that Dexter had killed Moore waned, he was handed Barth on a platter. The golf coach was clearly capable of shooting with the accuracy necessary to drill Moore through the forehead from a distance. He had at least as much motive as Dexter and he had had opportunity. He claimed to have continued to play the course alone after Moore shot his hole in one.

It could come down to the glove, he told himself, as he shoved the remains of his lonely dinner into the chute and went out to his car. There was one more errand he wanted to run before calling it a day.

The Moore residence looked different in the twilight. In that house a man had been found dead only hours before. He had been shot through the head and then hung up on a hook in the closet, feet off the floor, blood dripping from a leg wound that might have been caused when he leapt into the air to click his heels after his hole in one. Golf spikes are not sharp, but in such circumstances they could penetrate the skin. In any case, he had died from the hole in his head.

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As he approached the house, the sound of funereal music came to greet him. He could see one small lamp lit and the tragic figure of Mrs. Moore sitting on the couch, her chin resting in her hand. Portrait of a widow. She turned languidly when he knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Detective Caspar."

He saw her tense. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry to bother you again, Mrs. Moore. But there are more questions I have to ask you."

"What questions?"

"Could I come in?"

Silence. She had gotten up from the couch but he did not hear her approaching the door. He was ready to call the questions to her through the screen. Had she seen either Professor Dexter or Coach Barth around the house during the day? Had she heard a shot?

And then he heard her coming across the tiled porch to the door. A light went on. She was holding a pistol and pointing it at him.

"How did you find out?"

Caspar looked at the woman and then at the ominous barrel of the pistol she held. She gestured with the weapon.

"Come inside."

He had a swift image of himself bolting and running and being found with a bullet hole in the middle of his back. He opened the door and stepped inside. He crossed the porch and was about to enter the house when she barked:

"Take off your shoes first. It's taken me hours to clean up the mess you made earlier."

Caspar slipped out of his shoes.

"We never wear shoes in the house. Do you know what it does to carpets, coming in from outside and tramping around? He knew that as well as I did. And yet he came bounding in here like a madman, wearing golf shoes. Golf shoes! With spikes in the soles! He ran through the house, over the carpet, on my oriental rug. Who could blame me?"

"You shot him."

She nodded. "I couldn't get the shoes off him even then. So I rolled him into his topcoat and hung him on a hook, but then it no longer mattered. The spikes were off my floor. That's when I called you."

"Why didn't you tell me this right away?"

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She laid the barrel of the gun in the palm of her bare hand. She wore a cleaning glove on her shooting hand.

"Sometimes it's hard to believe that what happened really happened. When you got here I had begun to doubt my memory. When I took you into his study and opened the closet door I wouldn't have been surprised if he hadn't been there. But when I saw him and remembered him cavorting through the house with those dirty spiked shoes, well, I would have done it again."

"Let me have the gun."

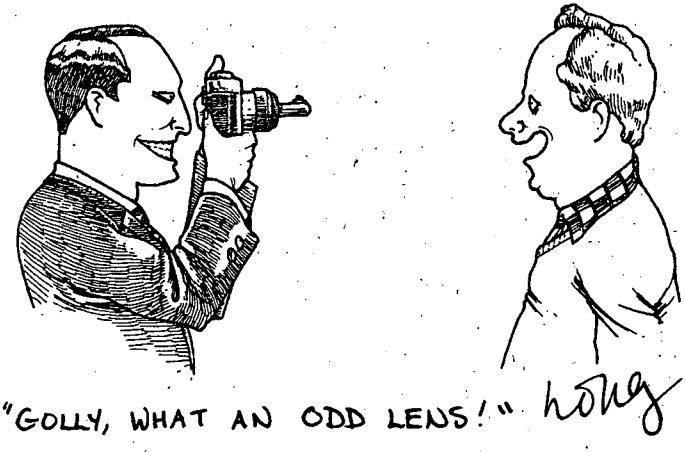
She shook her head. "I'm not done yet."

Caspar felt a chill spread over him. All she had to do was lift the gun and pull the trigger and he would be wherever her husband now was. She got a grip on the gun, testing its heft. Liking the feel, she steadied her wrist.

"Onto the porch, not on the carpet."

Caspar looked at her. Here was a woman who valued the cleanliness of her carpets above his life. He backed out onto the tiled porch with her following. She brought the gun up from beside her body. Caspar closed his eyes and tried to pray but all he could think of was the grace before meals. There was an explosion. He felt nothing. He opened his eyes to see Mrs. Moore slump to the floor, the gun clattering across the tile. In the middle of her forehead was a hole, messier than her husband's, but bringing about an identical result.

Caspar went down the hall to the bathroom and threw up. Then he picked up the phone and made two calls, the first 911, the second to Maloney. ●



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Art by Darryl Elliott

DRISCOLL HENLEY'S LAST DAY

by W. Edward Blain

Although he'd retired as a ticket collector from British Rail years ago, Nigel Greene continued to join his mates at the Oxford station after the pubs closed. He'd routinely ride his bicycle from Rosie O'Grady's on Hythe Bridge Street to the railway station and wait until the last train from Paddington arrived at 1:50 in the morning. There was always something to anticipate there, he explained to his daughter, Janet, who loved her dad and gave him a room at her home in Iffley, and who fretted that he was going barmy.

"Oxford isn't safe anymore," she would say. "You read the papers. Don't your friends at the pub worry about crime?"

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For years Nigel waved away her fears. "A man wants a chance to digest his ale," he told her. "It's near four miles to pedal home, and the traffic's much lighter at two in the morning, isn't it?"

Early on the morning of August sixth he set out from the station at exactly 2:13 A.M. The train had been a bit late. There was talk of a huge traffic queue on the M-40 from London, though to suggest that an overturned lorry should affect the train schedules was silly to Nigel. He'd visited the loo, put on the glowing safety vest that Janet insisted he wear, and departed for home on his bicycle. The night was warm and clear. He pedaled up George Street to Broad, then right on Turl, past Exeter and Lincoln Colleges. It was in Lincoln that Janet produced her outdoor summer plays, but of course tonight's performance had ended hours ago. Nigel didn't patronize his daughter's theatre anymore. He liked to say there was only so much Shakespeare that a man could stand in a lifetime, and Janet liked to reply that he was an old sot.

Like the protagonist in his story, prep-school teacher W. Edward Blain spent a demanding summer in 1995 on a trip to England with six of his students. Although, like the fictional Americans, the group stayed in Oxford for some time to study Shakespeare, they did not, Mr. Blain says, "get involved with any burglaries or murders. We did," he acknowledges, "have a few pierced ears." ¶

From Turl he turned left on the High Street. There was always some noise on the High, especially when the doner kebab lads parked their van at the spot where Lincoln bordered Brasenose. So many American tourists occupied Oxford this summer, loud ones, bloody rude, but tonight the kebab van served only one drunken couple as Nigel rode past. The High Street was virtually empty. Surprising not to see more than the one bus coming up behind him: Perhaps the rumors of traffic queues on the M-road were worth the hearing after all. On his left, the crenelated walls of Brasenose College stood like the dark battlements of a fortress, with only the odd light on in the upper dormitories. The lone bus passed him, discharged a couple of passengers at Queen Lane, and then proceeded with a roar toward London. There was no other

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traffic. Nigel coasted downhill now, past St. Mary's Church, past Queen's College, past Longwall Street. It wasn't until he was nearly at the Magdalene Bridge that he saw in the dim streetlight the strange young man wearing the American baseball cap turned backwards, the long hair straggly beneath the hat, the dark glasses—at night, mind you!—and the gaudy red shirt with the great black and white spots on it. The young man stood on the bridge with both hands gripping a rolling laundry cart, one of those huge canvas hampers you'd see in one of the hotels. The cart was heaped with linens. As he drew nearer, Nigel tried to reckon where the chap would be heading with laundry on Magdalene Bridge. The dark glasses followed Nigel like radar as he approached the center of the bridge.

When Nigel drew even with him, the young man shoved his laundry cart into the front wheel of Nigel's bicycle. The collision threw the rider onto the asphalt. Nigel hit the street on his right shoulder. His feet tangled in the pedals, and the momentum scraped the cloth off his trousers. He cried out in anger, then in fear as the great wheeled laundry cart struck him hard in the forehead. His seventy-four-year-old eyes were tricky, but he could still read the stenciled lettering on the canvas side of the hamper: BRASENOSE COLLEGE. It pulled back and struck him again, this time in the nose. Blood gushed onto his lips and chin and arms.

"Please," he said, "No money. O.A.P." Old Age Pensioner. It was all he could think to say.

There was still no traffic, and the doner kebab van up the High Street was out of sight, a third of a mile away and around the curve. The young man pulled Nigel's bicycle out from under him and tossed it against the stone wall of the bridge. Then he dragged Nigel to a spot beside the bicycle. "Here, buddy," the young man said. What a curious accent it was. Nigel felt a damp cloth being pressed into his hand and looked up into a face concealed by the brim of a cap, dark glasses, and disheveled hair over the ears and forehead.

"You wait," said Nigel. He tried to grab at the young man's shirt. Red background with black and white dogs all over. Cartoon dogs, white with black spots. Lots of them. He couldn't get a good grip because the shirt was soaking wet and slippery. The young man pushed him against the wall of the bridge, where the back of his head hit hard. The collision dazed him. When he came to, he

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was alone. No young man. No cart. No bicycle. He looked about him uncertainly. He was on the Magdalene Bridge in Oxford, and his nose was bleeding. He stared at the damp dark cloth in his hand, then held it gingerly to his face. His knee and shoulder hurt. He did not telephone his daughter or the police because he thought, somehow, that he had done something wrong, that Janet would be cross with him. It was important to walk home so that he could explain to her in person. Holding the damp gray cloth to his nose, he set out toward the Iffley Road. His head ached. But he held fast to the memory of dalmatians on a red shirt.

"Oxford," wrote Driscoll Henley cautiously on his weekly aerogram back to the States, "has not, in retrospect, been the best location for my introduction to parenthood." He paused and reread the sentence, decided that it struck the desired tone of wry understatement, and then continued. "You know, Suzanne, that I have worked with teenagers for sixteen years. But, believe me, I have never before appreciated the distinction between acting *in loco parentis* at boarding school and being the only adult supervisor of six boys for twenty-eight consecutive days." He stopped again. Too many numbers? Suzanne, as his Head of School, would know how many students were with him. She would also know that his Shakespeare course here was scheduled to last four weeks. Never mind. Weren't such details necessary to emphasize his exasperation? While he considered his tone, he wrote the date, August 6, at the top of the page. Then he wrote the time: 9:35 A.M. "The demands are relentless," he wrote. "Somebody is always sick, somebody has always lost something, somebody is always testing the rules. Last night, for example, I took the boys to see *Much Ado About Nothing* performed outdoors in the Lincoln College courtyard. It was a lovely setting for a fine production (resident actors, very good), but at the 'interval' Worth Mason disappeared and did not return to the performance until ten minutes remained in the entire show. So I've grounded him today. He pleaded for mercy, protested that he had come back here to Brasenose for a sweater and had been delayed by an argument with Tony, the night porter. But I'm keeping him on the college grounds all day, and then requiring him to go back to the show tonight—his last night here!—to see the parts that he missed. What's so infuriating about Worth Mason is that he's perfectly content to take the punishment. He agrees with me every time I run through an inven-

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tory of his faults, and he just good-naturedly goes off and does something impulsive and adolescent—"

Henley stopped writing. Wasn't this report sounding a bit too whiny? Did Suzanne really need to hear all these details? Wasn't he using too many exclamation points? Although it was hard to backpedal when he was writing a letter in longhand, he would try.

"—but I'm sure that he and all of his companions will appreciate the experience in retrospect. Very few high school students get to reside for a month at an Oxford college, especially one as convenient to the town as Brasenose has been."

He stopped himself in disgust. Now he was sounding like a travel agent. Outside the single window of his tiny cubicle here on Staircase 15 of Brasenose, the workmen erecting some scaffolding across the High Street sounded like a brigade of angry elves dismantling a tanker truck with mining hammers. Strangely enough, the din reassured him. Earlier today the traffic noise outside had been so uncharacteristically mild that he had slept through breakfast. On a more typical morning, starting at dawn and continuing throughout the day, he would hear buses, lorries, cars, motorcycles, and pedestrians passing beneath his window in relentless parade. At night the doner kebab van parked outside and generated a different sort of cacophony—the volume of Youth Unleashed, laughter and tape decks and guitars and debates among the multinational high school and college students here for summer programs. Henley himself had not tasted a doner kebab. It was one of the many issues on which he and his students disagreed. He thought that they ought to express more excitement when he took them to see Michael Gambon play Chekhov in London. ("But it's Michael Gambon!" he had told them at intermission. "So?" they'd replied.) They, in turn, thought that he should express more excitement over doner kebabs. They could not comprehend why he objected to consuming thin slices of greasy meat on crumbling pita bread in a setting most notable for toxic bus fumes and noise that could dissolve a kidney stone.

Noise, however, was a secondary problem. If you took all the human beings between ages fifteen and twenty-five who passed along this one block of Oxford, and then you added the youthful British actors residing next door at Lincoln College, you came up with a volatile hormonal stew. The doner kebab van served as both catalyst and venue for social chemistry—a combination dating service, social club, and recreation facility. It had taken Henley

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a full week to realize that his students were not here, in fact, to study Shakespeare, though that was why he had brought them. They had used Shakespeare the way that cunning Western reporters used Allah: to get themselves inside the sacred precincts of Mecca. Once in Oxford, Henley's six students dropped all pretense of scholarly interests. They were here to "par-tay," as they so irritatingly pronounced it, and their increasing impatience with Driscoll Henley was matched only by his commensurate annoyance with them.

Beside the half-finished aerogram on his scratched wooden desk lay a stack of six essays, the last ones of the term. Henley dreaded reading them. He had begun Worth Mason's and had cringed after the first foreboding sentence: *"Much Ado About Nothing* is the most accurately named play ever written." Why, Henley wondered, did he continue to enjoy the company of Worth Mason when the boy required such high maintenance? Henley could not decide whether he admired or abhorred Worth's history of unchecked spontaneity over the past month: Worth Mason finds a girlfriend in the acting troupe next door at Lincoln College. He spends his Bodleian Library tour money to get his ear pierced. He attends the theater in Stratford wearing a Disney shirt covered with 101 dalmatians.

Klaxon sirens mixed with the hammering outside as two police cars rushed down the High Street. Henley's stomach rumbled. He abandoned his letter and put on his leather walking boots. It was now 9:55 in the morning, and he could amble over to the covered market off the High Street for something to eat. Because today was their last full day in Britain, he had allowed the boys to sleep in. To be honest, he was granting himself a change from the routine as well. All Henley asked was a peaceful twenty-four hours so that he could get his charges onto the bus, into the terminal at Heathrow, and back to the States. Then he could visit the Barnhardts in Hilton Head and explore the relationship between scotch and amnesia. His thoughts of scotch vanished when the background noise shifted to a deeper pounding, a gatekeeper-and-Macbeth knocking, and he realized that someone was at his door.

It was Charles, their scout. He wore a light blue jacket designating him as a member of the housekeeping staff, and he held his passkey poised at the lock. When Henley opened the door, Charles automatically arrested his knocking and used the free hand to push his glasses up onto his nose. Because of his military haircut and

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rigid posture, the gesture looked something like an off-target salute.

"Come in, Charles," said Henley. "I was hoping you were room service bringing breakfast." Charles did not respond, and Henley wondered for a moment if he had insulted him in some way. It was so hard to know how much to joke with the British, especially with a male who was working in a job traditionally given only to women. The boys said that Charles was their favorite employee of the college, but their reason was that Charles had introduced them to the doner kebab van.

"Sorry for the disturbance, Mr. Henley," he said. "They asked for you at the porter's lodge." The only telephone in the building was a pay phone two floors down. Any messages had to be relayed on foot.

"What is it this time? Another lost key?"

"No sir," said Charles. "It's the police, sir."

Henley did not panic. He assumed that the police were asking for him because they had found Hank Shaughnessy's wallet, which had disappeared a week ago, or perhaps Sam Payne's compact disks and Walkman, or the traveler's checks misplaced by Lawrence Wren. You would have thought that rising seniors in high school could take care of their property more efficiently, but that wasn't the case with Henley's group.

He followed Charles down the stairs and through the warren of passages and walkways and courtyards to the porter's lodge. There indeed waited two members of the Oxford police department, a man and a woman, neither in uniform. The man wore a trim moustache, carried a notebook, and parted his hair neatly on the left. The woman had short red hair and carried a briefcase. Henley guessed her age to be about the same as his own, early forties. She introduced herself as Inspector Kendall and her assistant as Staff Sergeant McWatt.

"Mr. Henley," she said, not especially pleasantly, "there was a robbery last night in Lincoln College. One of the lot at the doner kebab van reported seeing a young man climbing the fence between Lincoln and Brasenose at half-past one in the morning. He wore a bright red shirt with dalmatians on it, and he carried a bulging plastic grocery sack. Would that be one of your lads, perhaps?"

Henley fought the temptation to groan. He recognized Worth Mason's shirt instantly, as would anyone who had been in this neighborhood for the past month. He did not believe for a second that any of his students would be involved in a robbery. He accepted without question, however, that one would climb the

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fence between Lincoln and Brasenose. It was a solid security fence, black metal spearlike poles spaced at four-inch intervals and rising to a height of ten feet. Perhaps this fence could deter a wandering gang of skinheads or an army of angry Celts, but it was no impediment to the frenzied yearnings of seventeen-year-old American boys. Worth Mason had a girlfriend in the theatrical troupe at Lincoln. Driscoll Henley required the boy's presence in Brasenose College by 11:15 each night, when the porter's lodge closed. Of course he would be going over the fence. Henley should have anticipated it earlier.

"He's mine," said Henley. He gave her the boy's name. "Was he going from Lincoln into Brasenose? Or was he climbing from here into Lincoln?"

"From Lincoln to Brasenose," she said. "On his way back home, so to speak."

That made sense. Anyone could open a college gate from within simply by turning the latch. But you needed a key to get from the outside back into the college precincts. Presumably Worth's girlfriend had let him inside the gate at Lincoln. The problem for him would have been to re-enter Brasenose at whatever indeterminate time his tryst ended. "Now I understand his behavior during intermission last night," he said. He explained to them that Worth had requested clemency for missing most of the second act on the grounds that he was arguing with Tony, the night porter. "He was probably asking him about a key to the gate. Or trying to get Tony to leave it unlatched."

Inspector Kendall sent her companion, Sergeant McWatt, to seek confirmation from Tony in the quarters occupied by the staff of the college.

"Let's confront the boy and clear this up now," said Henley. He hesitated. "Do you mind if I ask what was stolen?"

"Cash," she said. "Box-office receipts from the play. And other currency held by the domestic bursar. Almost seven thousand pounds in all. Very nicely managed, too. It happened some time after the bursar locked his office at one A.M. They didn't discover the break-in until this morning."

In the distance another siren throbbed. Henley asked her why he'd heard so many emergency vehicles this morning.

"That's the other half of my visit," she said. "Early this morning at the Magdalene Bridge, a retired employee of British Rail was beaten by a young man wearing dark glasses, a baseball cap, and

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a bright red shirt with spotted dogs on it. May I see this boy now, please?"

Even when Worth Mason turned up missing, Henley was more embarrassed than alarmed. He had to think that it was all some misunderstanding, some case of mistaken identity. A Foxborough student involved in grand theft and attacks on elderly men? Impossible. He and Inspector Kendall sat in rickety wooden chairs in the boy's bedroom on Staircase 15 and talked with Sam Payne, Worth's roommate.

"Yes, ma'am," said Sam Payne. Everything about him was short: his name, his height, his bright blond hair, his attention span. Wearing khaki walking shorts and a gray T-shirt with the name of their school—Foxborough Hall—stenciled across the front, he sat on the edge of the unmade bed and allowed his bare feet to fidget. Inspector Kendall and Henley had awakened him a few minutes ago, and he looked, to Henley's mortification, very badly hung over. But he gamely answered the inspector's questions, punctuating each response with a nervous glance at Henley to read how much trouble his confessions were generating. "Worth left just before midnight last night."

"Alone?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What was he wearing?"

"I can't remember, Ms. Kendall."

"Could it have been a red shirt with dalmatians on it?"

"No, ma'am," he said. "I don't think he had that on last night."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because," he said, "he's been wearing that shirt a lot. All the guys have been complaining because it smelled so bad. He was going to have it washed." He swallowed twice and looked very uncomfortable. Sam Payne was from High Point, North Carolina, and he spoke with a politeness bred into him by so many generations that it was virtually genetic. Henley knew that behind all the "ma'ams" and the "sirs" and the earnest expressions of candor was a very fine intelligence weighing each syllable before it emerged from that drawling mouth. Inspector Kendall, he noted, never smiled, never warmed to her conversant, never fell for the bashful charm of the teenager in front of her.

"You appear to own many clothes," she said, deadpan. Aha. Perhaps the good inspector possessed a sense of humor after all. The room was a mess. Underwear, socks, shoes, books, newspapers,

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shirts, and shorts littered the floor, dangled from the unused radiator, hung from the backs of the chairs where they sat. "Do you know if this dalmatian shirt is here?"

She reached down and picked up three more versions of the gray Foxborough gym shirt that Sam Payne wore, then let them drop to the brown rug again.

"No, ma'am," said Sam Payne. "Worth took it with him. Mary offered to wash it for him."

"Mary?"

"His girlfriend. She's an actor with the group staying at Lincoln."

The inspector made a note and nodded. "And why would she wash a shirt for him?"

"Not just one shirt," said Sam Payne . "All his laundry. He was laughing about how she'd offered. So he took it all over to Lincoln last night."

"Was his laundry in a grocery bag? A plastic bag from Sainsbury's?"

"Yes, ma'am." The boy placed a hand on his abdomen and looked to Henley for help. He received none.

"And he returned about one-thirty A.M.? Is that correct?"

"Ma'am?"

Immediately Henley was suspicious. The boy was stalling. "Sam," said Henley, "when did Worth get back?"

"I couldn't say. Exactly."

"Did he return to the room at all?"

Very long pause. All three of them knew it was too long. "No, sir," said Sam Payne. "He didn't."

"How do you know that he didn't just come in and go out again in the middle of the night?"

The boy shook his head. "I'd have heard him. I didn't sleep so good."

"Don't say 'good' when you mean 'well,' " said Henley. "The people at the doner kebab saw him carrying his bag of laundry over the fence at one-thirty in the morning. Where is it now? Why wouldn't he bring it back here?" Even as he asked the question, Henley knew one possible answer: because the bag contained something besides laundry.

Sam Payne, however, could help them no more. He swallowed again before he answered. "I don't know, Mr. Henley. I really don't know. But when he left, he said not to expect him back until

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nearly dawn. He said you'd grounded him for the day, but not for the night."

"Night is over, Sam."

The boy held his abdomen and nodded. He closed his eyes when Henley left the room to rouse the other students and ask if they had seen Worth Mason. They had not. They were not pleased to be waked.

"Right," said the inspector when Henley returned. "So he's gone, and he took his clothes with him. Are any of his other belongings still here? Luggage? Shaving kit?"

"Sure," said Sam, gesturing vaguely at the bureau. "He left all that stuff."

"His money?"

The boy wearily crossed to a corner of the rug and looked beneath. "He took his traveler's checks," he said. "But he doesn't have much money anyway. He's always borrowing from the rest of us."

She showed them a photograph from the playbill of the production they saw last night. "Is this the girlfriend?"

"Yes," said Sam. He pointed to the woman playing Hero. "Mary Livingstone. Except now she has longer hair. And it's darker than it looks in that picture."

When the inspector asked Henley for a photograph of Worth Mason, he apologized. They had taken many photographs over the past four weeks, but none had been developed. She tried again. "His photo is on his passport. Did he take that?"

"He couldn't have," said Henley. "I keep the passports and plane tickets in my room." They left Sam Payne alone and walked past the communal bathroom to Henley's room, where he unlocked the door and showed her the spare blanket in the top shelf of his closet. "They're all in here," he said. He reached into the folds of the blanket and found tickets and passports for everyone but Worth Mason. "This can't be," he said. He shook out the blanket, checked the entire closet. Nothing.

"You say he returned here during the interval last night," said Inspector Kendall.

"But my room is locked," said Henley. Then he saw how it could work. "He'd have to get a passkey—"

"From the night porter." She was already ahead of him, checking her notes. "The boy himself told you they'd talked. Could this

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student fabricate a story that would get him a passkey for a few minutes?"

Henley knew very well that he could. Tony, the porter, was too young to be cynical yet.

Inspector Kendall said that her assistant McWatt would find out whether any keys had changed hands last night. But she already had her pencil working on a description of Worth Mason. "Height?"

"Five-eight, five-ten, I guess."

"Weight?"

"I can't guess weight. He's not fat and not thin. Average build."

"Hair?" said Inspector Kendall.

"Dark, but not black. Not too long," said Henley.

"Eyes?"

"I'm not sure," said Henley. He felt like an idiot. "I never notice what color a person's eyes are."

Inspector Kendall stopped taking notes. "Perhaps the roommate will prove to be more observant," she said. By the time they returned, Sam lay flat on the bed with an arm across his forehead. Henley was embarrassed that the boy couldn't be more stoical.

"His eyes are sort of blue," said Sam.

Inspector Kendall continued her questions. "Any other distinguishing characteristics? Moles? Birthmarks?"

"No," said Henley.

"Ear," said the horizontal Sam.

The inspector asked him to speak again.

"He got his ear pierced," said the boy. "His left ear. He thinks it's getting infected."

Henley was growing uneasy. "Do you really need all this?" he asked. "Surely you'll find him with Mary Livingstone. They're probably in her room at Lincoln right now."

"Mary Livingstone has disappeared along with the money," said Inspector Kendall. "Her neighbors said that they heard a man in her room around midnight. Then she slipped out, and they haven't seen her since." She let the information register. "Those actors have been doing Shakespeare together for seven weeks, Mr. Henley. There are no secrets among them. Every person in the company says that she has a very serious boyfriend at Brasenose. A fellow who has her completely under his control. The kind who could get her to do his wash for him, for example. Or worse. And

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now your lad, his girlfriend, and his clothes all scarpered off last night with seven thousand pounds."

At that moment Sam Payne vomited into one of the discarded shirts on the floor.

"I'm leaving," said Inspector Kendall. "For now."

After her departure Sam moaned. It was the sound of someone suffering either great physical distress or a very guilty conscience.

Inspector Kendall met with Sergeant McWatt at the porter's lodge. Together they exited Brasenose College, squeezed past the mob of tourists outside the Radcliffe Camera, and turned left onto Brasenose Lane. The sun was bright and hot. She told him what she'd heard from Driscoll Henley and Sam Payne and instructed him to alert the airlines that the boy might try to swap his ticket for another flight. McWatt reported that Tony, the night porter, was out. "He's not due to work until five in the afternoon. But the other staff said that the missing boy might well have badgered him. Quite a pest, apparently."

"I want to find this Worth Mason," she said. "Any sightings at the train station? The buses? What about Heathrow and Gatwick?"

"It's hard without a photo of him," said McWatt. "But the girl's picture has helped. A driver says he saw Mary Livingstone get on his bus to London at half-past twelve. He remembered the long brown hair and the earrings. She was the only passenger to board at the Queen Lane stop."

"Queen Lane," said Inspector Kendall. It made sense. The Queen Lane bus stop lay between Brasenose College and Magdalene Bridge. "She was alone?"

"Yes."

"And she boarded the bus half an hour before the robbery could have occurred?"

"Correct," said Sergeant McWatt. "The Lincoln bursar left his office at one o'clock. The young man climbed the fence thirty minutes later, and it was another hour before Nigel Greene was attacked on the bridge."

As they turned onto Turl Street, a staff car pulled up beside them.

"Inspector," said the young patrolman driving, "we have something at the hospital you might want to see. We dredged up old

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Mr. Greene's bicycle from beneath the Magdalene Bridge. It was anchoring a dead body."

Inspector Kendall paused only for a moment. "Young woman with brown hair or young man with pierced ear?"

The driver raised one eyebrow. "Young man," he said. He read her the description: trim dark hair, blue eyes, no distinguishing features except the bloody aperture in the left ear where an earring had been yanked out of its passage. The body was naked. So far they had retrieved no clothing from the river.

Inspector Kendall listened carefully. "His clothes might still be in the laundry hamper," she said. "Isn't that what Mr. Greene reported? A Brasenose College laundry cart?"

McWatt nodded. "I've seen it. Big enough for a body. Big enough for two bodies, actually."

The inspector turned back to the patrolman in the car. "The earring was pulled forcibly out of his ear?"

"Yes. After death. And there's more. The water in the lungs isn't river water. It's fresh water out of the tap. With unmistakable traces of soap."

"Soap? Bath soap?"

"Laundry detergent."

Inspector Kendall pointed to the radio in the car. "Get a team to the Lincoln College laundry now," she said. "Look for any signs of violence at all. We'll do the same at Brasenose. And while we're there, we'll fetch Mr. Henley. We'll need him to identify the remains."

The car pulled away, and the inspector turned back toward Brasenose. McWatt hesitated. "Inspector," he said, "if it does turn out to be the body of the American schoolboy—"

"Yes?"

"Then who was that on the Magdalene Bridge? The one who attacked old Mr. Greene on his bicycle?"

"The same lad," she said. "Don't you see, McWatt? The boy does all the dirty work. The girl takes a bus ride to London. Which one do you suppose ends up with the money?"

"But if she was on the bus to London at half-past midnight, she couldn't have been here to get the money. Or to kill the boy, for that matter."

"It's only seventy-five minutes to central London at that hour," said Inspector Kendall. "And seventy-five minutes back."

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"Except," he reminded her, "that last night the northbound road had a terrible traffic queue. They're just sorting it out now."

Inspector Kendall paused. "Quite right," she said. She walked faster toward Brasenose College. "Mary Livingstone's an actor, isn't she? She'd be used to managing costumes and makeup, don't you think?"

McWatt hurried after. "I don't quite understand what you're suggesting."

"Do they have wigs for this theatrical troupe?"

"Yes, but—"

"Just babbling, McWatt." She told him to escort Henley to the morgue at the hospital while she checked the laundry room. But McWatt found her in just a few minutes to report that Driscoll Henley and Sam Payne had disappeared.

Driscoll Henley waited in Emergency Services at John Radcliffe Hospital and attempted to read student essays. Every atom in his body screamed at him that he should be searching Oxford, that he was supposed to be putting six students on the airplane tomorrow, one of whom had inexplicably turned into Young Dracula. He had thought of Worth Mason as a nuisance, but not as a vindictive, malicious schemer. Even now he wanted to find some other explanation for the boy's disappearance.

In a stained leather chair next to him, Sam Payne sat with his eyes closed and the zipper of his windbreaker pulled up to his chin. When Sam had confessed to constant abdominal pain for the past ten hours, worse than his appendicitis of two years ago, Henley had immediately called a cab. He could not imagine what sort of blockage, parasite, foreign object, poison, or other abnormality could be affecting this adolescent, but he was now convinced that it was not a hangover. He was simply trying very hard to avoid anger at the boy for choosing today to get sick. Henley wrestled with self-control. His duty was to be here, with this student. He had done everything else that he could, except to call Suzanne in the States. He kept hoping that Worth would show up and that there would be some logical explanation for his behavior. And then there was the larger question of whether the police would allow him to leave the country if one of his group were involved in a crime. How could life unravel so quickly?

The waiting room presented a scene out of National Health Hell. Injured people sat everywhere—small children in the arms

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of their parents, leather-clad teenagers, old folks bravely waiting their turn. Once the cab had dropped them, Henley and Sam had queued to see the triage nurse, whose job it was to determine just how serious the injury was. Apparently the American boy with no fever and no steady nausea did not qualify as a first-class emergency, for they now sat in the middle cluster of chairs, alongside the trim middle-aged woman with thick black hair who murmured comforting words to an old man holding a bloody gray cloth to his nose.

When Sam unzipped his windbreaker, the woman and the old man stopped murmuring and stared.

"What do you want with us?" said the woman. "Do the police know you're here?"

Henley was nonplussed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I think you have us confused with somebody el—"

"You're the one from Brasenose with the American students," said the woman. She pointed at Sam's gray Foxborough shirt. "It's a beacon, you see."

Reverently the old man held out the bloody cloth at his nose and unfolded it for them to examine. It, too, was a gray Foxborough shirt. "He gave it to me, didn't he, Janet?" the old man said. "After he smashed me up, he handed me a cloth for my nose. He had a curious accent."

The woman shook her head wearily. "You should have handed it to the police when they asked, Dad."

"But he gave it to me. He called me his buddy."

Henley wilted. "You're the man who was attacked at Magdalene Bridge," he said. "By one of my students."

"Yes," said the woman. She pointed at Sam Payne. "Is this the one?"

Driscoll Henley strove to imagine how the day could possibly turn worse. One student wanted for various felonies, another suffering from terminal illness, a stolen passport and plane ticket, and now the two people in Oxford he would place at the top of his list of Those You'd Rather Not Sit Next To in the Emergency Room.

Sam Payne squirmed beside him. "Mr. Henley?" he said.

"Yes, Sam. What do you need?"

"Have you graded my essay yet?"

Henley resisted the temptation to shout. He opened the boy's

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essay and read the dreadfully mindless opening line: "Why would Beatrice tell Benedick to kill his best friend Claudio?"

"His shirt was wet," said the old man.

Startled, Henley thought for a moment that he had read the question aloud. But the old man was speaking to his daughter. Henley wondered why a mugger would wear a wet shirt. It was a more interesting question than the one raised by Sam Payne's essay. Everyone knew the motive for killing Claudio. To avenge what he'd done to poor Hero, of course.

Inspector Kendall and Sergeant McWatt, their hands gloved, moved methodically around the smooth concrete floor of the Brasenose College laundry room. It was a small room, with space only for three commercial washers, three dryers, a cylindrical water extractor, and a deep washing sink with taps. Outside in the hallway, between the staff bathroom and the staff living quarters, an empty laundry hamper sat harmlessly on its casters. They assumed, however, that the pile of wet sheets and towels filling the mammoth sink had come from the hamper. And in the middle washing machine, they found all their prizes.

"Hello," said Sergeant McWatt. "Here's our dalmatian shirt clinging to the walls."

"They don't know much about sorting whites from colors, do they?" said Inspector Kendall. "Careful with that shirt now. Stow it in a plastic bag."

There was an extraordinary crush of clothes in the washing machine, enough for two loads. At one point McWatt hauled out a sopping terrycloth bathrobe and tossed it onto the pile. They could see a lump of hair bulging in one pocket.

"Crikey," said McWatt. It was a wig. A wet baseball cap occupied the other pocket. "Don't actors wear robes when they're doing makeup?"

"And at other times," said the inspector.

When McWatt extracted his final handful of wet laundry, they both heard the clatter of something small falling from the wet clothes back into the metal cylinder of the washer.

"What was that?" the inspector asked. "An earring, perhaps?" She nudged McWatt out of the way and reached her gloved hand into the machine. From it she pulled a toothbrush.

"Now there's a surprise," said McWatt.

"Is it?" she said. She slipped the toothbrush into an envelope

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and then gestured impatiently at the pile of wet clothes. "Get someone in here to look after this lot. And check again for Mr. Henley. There's a body at John Radcliffe Hospital to be identified."

"Henley's nowhere in the college," said McWatt. "None of the Americans are."

"Then find someone else," she said. At that moment Charles, the scout, walked past the door to the laundry on the way to his room. "You," she said. "You'll have to wait in the courtyard. A team of officers will be here any moment to set up barriers." Charles obediently turned to leave, but then she stopped him. "You know all the American students, don't you?" She didn't even pause for an answer. "Get the car, McWatt," she said. "We're going to the morgue."

Henley tried to concentrate on the essays in front of him, but he had to fight constant interruptions from Nigel Greene and his daughter Janet. She was particularly loquacious about the mugging.

"I should have thought that a teacher would have warned his student off a sort like Mary Livingstone," she said.

"How was I to know?" Henley said. He struggled to keep his temper. "How do you know Mary Livingstone, anyway?"

"Janet pays the lot of them," said the old man.

She patted his knee to quiet him, but then she went on to tell Henley about her work as producer of the acting troupe at Lincoln College. "I'm the fool who hired her. We've spent all morning with the police talking about muggings and robberies. That's why we're still queuing for Dad to see a doctor."

Henley realized through his irritation that she was more exhausted than angry. And he had to admit that she was having a fairly awful day herself. Everything in her face sagged except for her huge, watery eyes. "Did the police think there was a connection between the attack on your father and the robbery?" asked Henley. "Was it just a coincidence?"

"Of course there's a connection," said the woman. "Mary's a very vindictive sort. She shows up to play Hero seven weeks ago and immediately demands equity wage. Says I promised it to her. I laughed. We've never been a union company. She tells me I'm cheating her. I laughed again, and I said, Yes, Your Ladyship, you needn't stay. For seven weeks I've been listening to her grousing.

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But she won't go because she says she's in love with a young man at Brasenose."

"Seven weeks," said Henley. That was how long it felt as if he'd been in this waiting room. His four weeks in Oxford seemed like four years.

"Seven weeks," she said again. She rubbed her eyes with both hands. "You hear all these tales of Mary's boyfriend at Brasenose. Her charming, manipulative boyfriend. But she's the manipulative one, if you ask me. Has the men bowing and scraping before her like peasants."

"His shirt was wet," said the old man.

"Yes, yes," she said to him. "Easy now. It's all over. His shirt was wet from the river."

Or wet from the wash, thought Henley. It was removed from the machine before it was dry. Why? He felt as if he were staring at one of those holographic posters, all swirls and senselessness until the mind could relax into seeing the picture that was there all along. Seven weeks? Why did that number resonate?

"He said I was his buddy," said the old man. "But it was an odd American accent."

None of the behavior Henley had heard about today made sense. Climbing the fence directly in front of the doner kebab wagon. Handing the old man a Foxborough shirt. Tramping up and down the High Street with a laundry cart in those eye-catching clothes. The only person who would do so would be a person who wanted to be noticed. A person who wanted to be mistaken for Worth Mason. So why couldn't Mary Livingstone—

Sam Payne elbowed Henley. "Mr. Henley?" he said.

"Let me think," said Henley.

"Mr. Henley," said Sam again. "It's that lady from the police."

Henley looked up to see Inspector Kendall approaching him. She was accompanied not by Sergeant McWatt but, to Henley's surprise, by Charles, the scout, who looked quite annoyed to be there.

Inspector Kendall stooped to speak directly at eye level as Henley sat in his chair. "I should have realized you'd be here. You had a sick student." She looked over at Nigel Greene and his daughter. "Small world," she said.

"Did you find Worth?" Henley asked.

"Perhaps," she said. "Will you come and look?"

"Is he here? Is he hurt?"

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She told him what they had discovered, ending with where and how they had found the dalmatian shirt. "The rest of Worth Mason's clothes also turned up in the washer at Brasenose," she said. "Downstairs we have the body of a young man. Drowned in the Brasenose laundry sink and submerged in the water beneath Magdalene Bridge."

Henley should have eaten something today. He dropped his handful of essays and stared stupidly at them on the tile floor of the waiting room. Worth Mason was dead. He heard the voice of Charles, his scout. Henley registered that Charles was talking about him. "Now that you've found Mr. Henley," Charles said, "you won't be needing me, will you? I have to work."

Nigel Greene held the damp T-shirt to his nose and began to weep. "He called me his buddy," he said.

Inspector Kendall watched the old man cry as if she were a director holding auditions. "Don't leave this hospital until we talk again," she told him. She was so utterly cold-blooded. Suddenly Henley was furious with her. It was all the fault of the police. Everything had gone well today until they had summoned him from his room and introduced all this talk about robberies and muggings and now murders. "Why did you have to bring Charles?" said Henley. It seemed important somehow. He wanted an excuse to become very angry. "Charles and Worth were friends. Why didn't you bring Tony? He's the one that argued with Worth last night."

"Tony wasn't there," said Inspector Kendall.

"Well, then where—?" Henley stopped. Tony wasn't available today. Why not? He carefully picked up the essays where he had dropped them on the floor. By the time he'd gathered them, he understood.

"Let me ask a question," Henley said. "What if Mary Livingstone had known her boyfriend at Brasenose before my group even arrived?" He looked around the group. Everyone except Sam Payne stared back. "*Much Ado* has been running for seven weeks. Mary would have had time to meet plenty of people before we got there. You saw her at Brasenose frequently, didn't you, Charles? Didn't she spend lots of time at our college before she met Worth Mason?"

For once Charles simply let his glasses slide down his nose and stay there. "That was so long ago," he said. "In June. She stopped coming round in July."

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"In June, though. She'd come over after the show? And your friend Tony, the night porter, would let her in?"

"Yes," said Charles. He looked miserable. "They had that arrangement."

It was so obvious now. "Worth Mason was the perfect loudmouth American," said Henley. "He was flamboyant even among other tourists, a person that everyone would notice and remember. He was perfectly cast to play the role of Mary's manipulative boyfriend. But he didn't manipulate her. She was always the one to initiate ideas. She was the one who offered to do his wash." Henley took some paltry satisfaction in speaking those words to Inspector Kendall. She had been so quick to blame the Americans for the crime. Poor Worth. Taken in by the flattering British performer, and now he was dead. Henley stood. "Let's go to the morgue and get this over with," he said.

Charles offered to stay in the waiting room with Sam.

"I understand your reluctance, Charles," said Henley. "But once you see the body, your feelings about Tony could change."

They left Sam in the waiting room with the old man and his daughter and walked one flight down. Henley could reconstruct the entire series of events. Tony had acted so diligent about maintaining evening security in the college. All a performance, of course, while he and Mary planned their exploitation of Worth. Last night Worth had gone back to his room for a sweater. Could he have seen Tony snooping in Henley's room, where the passports and tickets stayed? Whatever the cause of their argument, it was enough to guarantee that what might have started as a simple frame-up for burglary would escalate into murder.

Sergeant McWatt, perspiring, met them at the door to the morgue. "We found Mary Livingstone," he said. "She was on a bus from London. It was just as we thought. Caught in the traffic queue. Took nine hours to untangle it. Otherwise they'd have been back here before dawn. No one would have missed them."

Inspector Kendall was pleased. "Then he was with her?"

"Yes," said McWatt. "Not sitting together, but on the same bus. He claims that the stains on his shirt are tomato sauce."

"But you have him?" asked Henley. "He's in your custody?"

"Both of them," said McWatt. "Safe and sound, Mr. Henley."

Henley's anger competed with his sadness. Mary had asked to do Worth's laundry so that she could acquire the most recognizable shirt at Brasenose. That's what she'd tell the police the next

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day: that Worth had asked her to mind his clothes, and that she always did what he said. But, as soon as she started the wash cycle, she would immediately take the bus to London. She would need an absolutely flawless alibi for the time of the robbery and the murder. So Tony, who was undoubtedly already in her room at Lincoln, could remove the wet shirt from the washer at Lincoln, put on a wig and dark glasses, break into the bursar's office, and ostentatiously climb the fence at Brasenose. He could call more attention to himself by wheeling the laundry hamper down the High Street and attacking the old man. The police would be searching for a mad teenager who had taken his passport and ticket and disappeared. They weren't supposed to find the body in the river.

Inspector Kendall pushed open the door to the chilly morgue. Sergeant McWatt waited until everyone in the group, including the protesting Charles, was inside the tiled room. Henley prepared himself before he looked. The body, covered up to the waist by a white sheet, lay on a metal table. He recognized the face instantly.

"Mr. Henley?" asked Inspector Kendall. "Can you identify him?"

"Yes," said Henley. He had a hard time talking. "It's Tony. The night porter." Henley stared down at the corpse. A rival lover. Only he'd confused the two. It was Worth Mason who was the killer after all.

Charles, still in his blue housekeeping jacket, stirred beside the door. "I'm going to be sick," he said. "I have to leave."

"Mr. Henley?" said Inspector Kendall. "What do you have to say now?"

"Even Tony's earring was irresistible," said Henley. He could think only of the treacherous student who had tricked all of them with his insouciance. "Tony's death wasn't part of the original plan, was it? He'd have been there in the staff quarters. Maybe taking a bath."

"Or brushing his teeth after bathing," said Inspector Kendall. "We found his robe."

"And in walked a thief wearing a preposterous costume and carrying a grocery bag full of clothes and money," said Henley. "They struggled. Tony died. Tony ended up in the laundry cart and then in the river. The old man on the bicycle appeared just when our Brasenose killer realized he needed an anchor." Sickening. Worth Mason was more devious than Henley had imagined. He'd taken his passport and plane ticket, but then he and Mary

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must have improvised an even more daring scheme. They would rendezvous in London, flaunt their presence in several crowded clubs, and then return to Oxford as if they'd simply sneaked out for a farewell fling. Worth's excuse for the police was going to be that somebody must have been dressing up in his clothes. He would claim innocence on the grounds that no one in his right mind would make such a public display of his criminal activities. And he could point to the fact that his dalmatian shirt had gone into a washer in Lincoln college but had ended up in one at Brasenose. "The key," Henley said, "was to draw as much attention as possible to the outfit."

Charles broke the silence. "You're clever for an American, Mr. Henley."

It was the rudest statement Henley had ever heard Charles make. But who could blame him? What was his thanks for befriending the boys, for trying to make the group feel welcome in a foreign land? A well-meaning scout should never have cared so much. Because of Henley's student, Charles had to behold one of his colleagues lying dead. Sometimes it was foolish to be kind. "I'm sorry, Charles," said Henley. "You made a terrible mistake."

"I made no mistake at all," said Charles. "It was that damn fool Mary who got stuck in bleeding traffic."

Henley had never heard Charles raise his voice like that before. "I simply meant that you'd wasted your time in making friends with Worth."

"Wasted my time?" Charles shouted. "For seven thousand quid?" He bolted for the door, but Sergeant McWatt was there first. He did something very quickly with Charles's arms and legs, and in a moment Charles stood with his hands manacled behind him.

"Excellent," said Inspector Kendall. "Well done, Mr. Henley." She turned to address Charles, who was grappling unsuccessfully with Sergeant McWatt. "We'll make sure that Nigel Greene gets to identify you before he leaves."

"Bloody old sod," said Charles. His voice was full of loathing. "He's no witness. He saw a kid in a baseball cap and a bright shirt."

"Oh?" she said. "I believe he recognized your voice just now upstairs."

Henley stood stupidly beside the corpse of Tony, the night porter. "Excuse me," he said, "but you mean Mary and Charles—?"

"Don't play stupid," said Charles. "You tumbled to the whole lot. You helped them trick me into coming here." He glared at Henley.

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over the tops of his eyeglasses, which apparently he did not need for anything but reading.

Inspector Kendall offered Henley a handshake. He took it warily. "How much of this did you know when you approached me upstairs?" he asked.

She smiled. "How much did you?"

Henley wasn't certain of whether to feel proud or lucky. At least he'd been mostly right. He'd merely misidentified one of the principals.

"Just tell me this," he said. "If Charles and Mary collaborated on the theft, and Charles committed the murder, and if this is Tony's body, then the person on the bus with Mary Livingstone is—?"

Everyone looked at him oddly. Sergeant McWatt finally responded. "Your student, of course. Worth Mason."

"But if he had nothing to do with any crime, why did he run away?"

"It seems," said McWatt, "that he was fetching a gift in London. Last night was the only time he could go. Today he was . . . what's your American term?"

Henley sighed. "Grounded," he said.

At 5:30 P.M. Henley finished his letter to Suzanne. "Everybody did well enough on the final essays," he wrote. "My last day was a bit hectic, but I'll spare you a detailed report. It was nothing unusual for somebody accustomed to working in boarding schools." He put on a tie and jacket and descended to the tiny Deer Lawn near the Brasenose Chapel. The white tablecloth of the bar glowed in the golden afternoon sunlight. Five of his six students, also in jackets and ties, hurriedly poured champagne. Lawrence Wren, who was even taller and thinner than Henley, held up his glass. "A toast, Mr. Henley. To the guy who can't be here."

Before Henley could respond, however, the missing student appeared. It was Sam Payne, looking very happy.

"Sam," said Worth Mason, whose tie covered most of the catsup stains on his white shirt, "we were about to go ahead without you."

Sam still wore the T-shirt and shorts in which he'd spent the day at the hospital. He carried his windbreaker and ate from a box of saltine crackers. "Acute indigestion," he said. "They told me not to have more than three doner kebabs in one night."

Worth Mason began to hand out glasses of champagne.

"No champagne," said Henley.

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General protests. Henley ignored them and faced Worth Mason. He was going to notice everything from now on. The eyes were turquoise. The hair brown. The whiskers minimal. The earlobe with the gold stud in it red. The grin huge. Henley wanted to wipe the grin away. "You're in very serious trouble," he said. "You went AWOL last night and very nearly caused a disaster."

"Oh, come on, Mr. Henley," said Hank Shaughnessy. Freckles, braces. "He got his ticket and passport back." The police had found everything in the bottom drawer of Charles's bureau: the missing wallets, the CD's, the money, the passport, the ticket. Even Tony's earring. Charles had a problem with kleptomania. "And he went to London for you. Show him, Worth."

From an inside pocket of his sports coat Worth pulled out a greasy packet wrapped in white butcher's paper.

"You went to London to buy me a doner kebab?" Henley asked.

Worth grinned again. "I forgot I had this in here," he said. "Ought to taste good." From another pocket he extracted a playbill from the Aldwych Theatre. "I got you Michael Gambon's autograph." He handed the rolled booklet to Henley as if it were a diploma. "Mary knew the stage manager. They got Gambon to sign it before the show last night. And then Mary met the stage manager at this club in Tottenham Court. It was the only way to guarantee the playbill got to you."

Michael Gambon's autograph. Henley was more pleased than he wanted to indicate. "So Mary was good for something? Despite her involvement in this ridiculous scheme?"

"Yeah," said Worth Mason. "Of course, the irony was that I thought she was doing me a favor when she gave me all these tips about how to blend in with the crowd at the bus station, how to adjust my hair and my posture to change my appearance, how to keep my head low and stay out of sight in London. To dress in normal clothes. Not to sit with her on the bus or anything. I couldn't even go into the club with her to get the autograph. She said Mr. Henley could never prove I was in London if there weren't any witnesses, and she would swear that she'd gone by herself."

Sam Payne ate another saltine. "Okay," he said. "So that's why you got on the bus at the station and not at Queen Lane with Mary?"

"Sure. Plus, I didn't want to wait out on the High Street in front of Brasenose," said Worth. "I mean, Mr. Henley is always complaining about the noise. I figured he'd look out the window sometimes."

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Henley had to admire the planning of Charles and Mary. When the police came looking for the American student in the dalmatian shirt, Sam Payne would testify that Worth, carrying the shirt, had left the room around midnight; the bus driver would report that Mary Livingstone had boarded alone; and Mary herself would deny that Worth had traveled with her. The boy would have no easily corroborated explanation for his whereabouts during the time when everyone at the kebab van had supposedly seen him climbing the Brasenose fence. Of course, the killing of Tony had been unplanned, an act of desperation by Charles, whose behavior afterward became increasingly irrational. Rolling the body down to the bridge, taking the old man's bicycle—he took enormous risks, and he admitted that he would have killed Worth Mason, too, when the boy came back from London. He could stage an accident for Worth in the bathtub, inviting the police to conclude that fate had intervened to bring their miscreant to justice.

Michael Gambon's autograph had been expensive. Henley put the playbill carefully into a coat pocket. "So why did you argue with Tony last night?"

"My ear. He recommended the shop that pierced it. And it's getting infected." Worth began to unwrap the paper around his day-old kebab. "How can you be so relaxed?" asked Henley. "If it hadn't been for that traffic delay, you'd be dead right now."

Worth agreed. "Why do you think I'm in such a good mood?" he said. "I think it's pretty cool that we had such a happy ending on the last day. Here. Have some champagne. And I'll have some too, okay?"

There was something exasperatingly likable about this student. "One condition," said Henley.

"I'll still see Act Two tonight," said Worth. "Mary's understudy is pretty hot."

"That's not the condition," said Henley. "You get some champagne, I get the doner kebab. I'm starving." Before the boy could answer, Henley took the kebab from him and bit in. Cold, gummy, sticky, faintly rancid, full of fat. Its pungent sauce brought tears to his eyes.

"You know, Mr. Henley," said Worth Mason, "I think our last day was the best day of the trip."

And instantly the doner kebab became the best thing Henley had ever tasted. ●

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SUDDENLY, WITH FANGS

by Edward D. Hoch

The Pinkerton Detective Agency, on whose behalf Ben Snow's services are enlisted in this story, was founded in 1850 by Scottish immigrant Allan Pinkerton. Pinkerton was also the first detective on the city of Chicago's police force. In real life, Pinkerton's detectives often solved cases involving famous people (including an attempt on Abraham Lincoln's life) so it seems appropriate for Mr. Hoch to make use, fictionally, of their search for Butch Cassidy. †

The man in the snakeskin mask left the package out at the gate, and he had turned his buggy back toward town before Seth Renfrew stuck a Colt six-shooter in his belt and went out to see what it was all about. Masked men were uncommon in Utah's peaceful Ashley Valley by 1908, when the taming of the West was all but complete. It wasn't that Renfrew was without enemies, but they were more likely to attack him through his financial holdings than to leave a dynamite bomb at the gate of his ranch.

Still, he approached the box with caution. It was made of cardboard, about the size of a shoebox, and addressed to him in bold block letters with no hint of the sender. Bending over, he was about to pick it up when he noticed something odd and just a bit frightening. Several small holes about the diameter of a pencil had been punched through the cardboard lid.

Air holes.

He slipped the Colt revolver from his belt and stood perfectly still, staring at the box. Waiting for some sort of movement.

Slowly he pulled back the hammer and aimed the weapon at the exact center of the box. He squeezed the trigger and the box seemed to jump at the impact of the bullet. Then he fired five more

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times into the lid, emptying his pistol. Renfrew used the barrel of the weapon to break through what little remained of the lid. The box was empty, or virtually so. In the bottom was a piece of paper, now riddled with bullet holes, with a crude drawing of a coiled snake and the words *Next time!*

He slid the empty gun back under his belt and carried the box into the house, wondering about the man in the snakeskin mask. Perhaps it was time for him to leave Utah. The enemies you know are bad enough; the enemies you don't know can kill you. He set the box on the table and placed the gun beside it. That was when he glanced into the kitchen and noticed the broken window in the back door. He picked up the gun, forgetting it was empty, and dashed forward.

The two-foot-long coral snake, its fangs already erect and full of poison, struck out at him as he entered the room.

Though only in his late forties, Ben Snow had developed an older man's habit of reminiscing about his early days out West. He worked hard at the security and protection business he'd started in Richmond, Virginia, and sometimes when he'd come home after a long day his wife helped him relax with questions about the old days.

Ben had met Tamia Ponter in Washington in 1905 when she'd accompanied the Apache chief Geronimo to Theodore Roosevelt's inauguration. Her deceased father had been a railroad worker, but her mother was a Ute, and Tamia taught Indian children at Fort Sill, where Geronimo and his family were allowed to farm the land. She traveled with the Apache, acting as his translator, and Ben was immediately struck by her beauty and intelligence. Even when she was angry, which wasn't too often, her deep brown eyes had a way of flashing that he found delightful. "You seduce me with your anger," he told her once, but she pretended not to understand.

Tamia returned east in the summer of 1905, and they were married before the end of the year. She found a job teaching in Richmond, and though she was fifteen years younger than Ben, their marriage was idyllic. During their first three years together she heard all the stories about his early days as a gunfighter, where he was often mistaken for Billy the Kid, and about his wanderings through the western states and territories, even into Canada and Mexico. She asked about his first experience with a real mystery

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and heard more than once about his strange trio of adventures involving the mission church at San Bernardino.

Tamia corresponded regularly with her Ute mother back at Fort Sill, and they learned through these letters of Geronimo's continued drinking and failing health. Ben had become friends with the Apache during their meeting in Washington, and he and Tamia often talked of visiting him before he died. Tamia's mother took the train east for a visit every year, but Ben's business wasn't yet profitable enough to afford the trip to Oklahoma, even with the help from Tamia's teaching salary. Ben knew too that he had a mental block about going west again after his years away. The day he'd put his horse Oats out to stud in Texas, he'd determined never to return, to live the rest of his life on the East Coast.

But in August of 1908 all that changed with a single visit from a man named Max Mirra. It was a warm Sunday afternoon and Ben was out behind the house chopping wood when Tamia called to him. "You have a visitor," she said simply.

"Anyone I know?"

"His name is Max Mirra. He's here on business."

"Tell him I conduct business at my office."

"I think you'd better see him, Ben." She walked across the grass and handed him a calling card.

"Max Mirra, Pinkerton's National Detective Agency," he read. "A Pinkerton, coming to see me?" In his dreams Ben had always imagined himself somehow in competition with Pinkerton's, an East Coast version of the famed Chicago agency. It was curiosity more than anything else that prompted him to put down the axe and follow Tamia into the house.

Mirra was a short man, a bit overweight, who held a derby hat in front of him with both hands. When Ben appeared he released his grip and extended his right hand in greeting. "Mr. Ben Snow? I'm Max Mirra. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." Ben motioned him to a chair in their sitting room. "What can I do for you?"

"You're no doubt aware of our reputation. 'The Eye That Never Sleeps.' That's our motto."

"I know."

"We have a very large staff and rarely need to call on outside experts."

"Except as strikebreakers," Ben said with a smile, and saw the

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flash of Tamia's angry eyes over the back of their visitor's head. "Sorry. That just slipped out."

Max Mirra cleared his throat. "This has nothing to do with labor union activity, Mr. Snow. You earned quite a reputation during your years out west and we believe you're just the man we need for this investigation. We want you to find someone for us. There's a very large reward on his head and we have reason to believe he's in the state of Utah."

Ben immediately shook his head. "Sorry, but I haven't been west in years. I only work in the East now."

"Pinkerton's would pay all your expenses plus a fee of twenty-five dollars a day, including travel time."

Ben avoided looking in Tamia's direction. The money was very good, and with the train ride out and back it could add up to nearly a month's work. He knew she'd urge him to take it. "You must have a dozen men on your payroll who could do the job. Why hire an outsider like me?"

"At my office they feel you have special qualifications. You can handle a gun."

"Those days are over, Mr. Mirra. Did you ever hear of law and order?"

Max Mirra smiled slightly. "Did you ever hear of the Wild Bunch?"

"Heard of them, never came across them. Black Jack Ketchum, Harry Tracy, Flat-Nose George Curry, Harvey Logan, Bob Parker—"

"Parker's the one we want."

Ben snorted. "Good luck to you! Last I heard, he was somewhere in South America."

"We have a report he may have come back."

"Still, why me?"

The short man shrugged. "You might get closer to him than anyone else could, because of who you used to be."

Ben felt a chill at the words. "Who would that be?"

"You know—Billy the Kid."

"You've got it all wrong. I was never—"

Mirra waved his hand. "Sure, sure! But it doesn't make any difference, does it? If he thinks you're Billy, he'll come talk to you. Then you arrest him and it's all over. Simple as that."

"I don't have any authority to arrest him."

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"Leave that to us. We'll have men nearby who'll take him off your hands."

Ben didn't like any part of it. "I'd need a few days to think it over," he said finally, for Tamia's benefit.

Max Mirra shook his head. "Sorry, that can't be. We believe he's only in Utah for a few weeks and then he'll be heading back to South America. We might never get another chance at him."

Ben glanced at Tamia, but he could not read the expression on her face. "Give me an hour," he said finally. "Come back then and you'll have your answer."

The Pinkerton man left the house and drove away in a new Packard motorcar, watched by Tamia with some envy. "That's expensive," she observed. "They make good money."

"You want me to go, don't you?"

"The decision is yours, Ben. It's not dangerous, is it? You know the West better than any man alive."

"I know the West as it was a decade or two ago. I haven't been back since the turn of the century. I haven't even been on a horse since then."

"Who is this man Bob Parker?"

"He used to lead a train robbers' syndicate called the Wild Bunch. He's better known as Butch Cassidy."

"I've heard of him. I thought he was dead."

"He fled to South America with the Sundance Kid and a girl, Etta Place. The Pinkertons have been after them for years."

Tamia was interested now. "Where'd he get a name like Butch Cassidy?"

"Cassidy was the name of a young outlaw who rustled cattle with him years ago. Butch was the name of a borrowed gun."

"Is he fast with it?"

"They claim he's never killed anyone, and he hates it when his friends do."

That seemed to decide her. "Then go, Ben. You can take care of yourself and we could certainly use the money. I only wish I could go with you, but someone has to stay and run the office. Just come back before school opens next month." She paused. "And come back alive."

He gave her a hug. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Tamia."

When Max Mirra returned in one hour's time, Ben told him he'd accept the assignment. He'd be ready to leave the following day.

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Travel by train was greatly improved since Ben's last experience with it. He changed trains at St. Louis and then headed on through Kansas City and Denver to his destination. Mirra was his companion as far as St. Louis, filling him in on details of his assignment.

"You see, Ben, the secret of Cassidy's success between 1896 and 1901 was a quick getaway on relays of thoroughbred horses. His horse dealer was a Jesuit priest named Cleophas Jones who wore six-shooters over his cassock and knew when to use them. It's said that he administered last rites to the first man he ever shot. He settled at Sheep Creek Canyon in Utah, and took to raising horses for outlaws like Butch Cassidy's crowd. But after 1900 all that started to change. The lawmen had horses as good as Butch's, and we weren't above hiring gunmen to pick off the gang one at a time."

"Is that what I am now?" Ben asked. "A hired gunman?"

"No, you're a paid investigator. If you need to use your weapon, I'm sure you'll do it. There's a bonus for bringing in Cassidy, dead or alive."

"What about this Sundance Kid?"

"Harry Longbaugh, got the nickname from serving a term at the Sundance jail in Wyoming. He and Butch teamed up around 1900 and robbed a bank, then a train in Montana. He and his girl Etta Place fled to New York with Butch in the fall of 1901, after the gang broke up. They lived pretty high there and finally sailed together for Buenos Aires. By that time Butch was using the name James Ryan. As soon as they arrived in Argentina they bought twelve thousand acres of land for ranching. One of our men traced them that far, but the area was too wild for him. We do know that before long Butch had assembled a small gang and they started robbing banks around Santa Cruz. Sundance's girl Etta rode with them, dressed as a man. Last December they suddenly sold the ranch to a beef syndicate. One rumor is that Etta needed surgery in New York. Sundance came back with her and they went on to Denver while she recuperated. Apparently she's living there now, but Sundance left her and met up with Butch in Utah, near the Jesuit's old horse farm. They may have buried some loot there in the old days. That's where you might find them."

"Is the gun-toting padre still around?" He didn't much like the idea of drawing on a man of God, whatever his background.

"Long gone," the Pinkerton man assured him. "The place is

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owned by a land speculator named Seth Renfrew and his two half-brothers, or at least it was until a couple of weeks ago."

"What happened then?"

"The local sheriff found him dead in his ranch house, along with a half-dozen poisonous coral snakes. They didn't crawl in by themselves. Utah is too far north for coral snakes."

"You think Butch Cassidy has switched from guns to snakes?"

"I don't know what to think. That's your job, Ben."

The Union Pacific line followed the track of the first transcontinental railway, and Ben got off as near as he could to his destination in Ashley Valley, renting a horse and buggy for the remainder of the journey. It had been sixteen years since he last visited Utah, and the state had changed along with the remainder of the West he'd known so well. Even in the smaller towns it was not unusual to see a motorcar driving along the road, frightening the horses with a blast of its bulbous horn. Towns were springing up at crossroads, and sheep and cattle ranches were more abundant than he remembered. Wasteland made fertile by extensive irrigation was bringing in bumper crops in the Utah valleys.

Mirra had supplied Ben with Pinkerton identification, and his first stop was the sheriff's office in the Ashley Valley area. Sheriff Weston, a tall man who wore a business suit, was a long way from the frontier sheriffs Ben had known.

His office was equipped with wooden filing cabinets and a telephone. On the wall behind his desk was a framed photograph of President Theodore Roosevelt.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Snow?" he asked.

"There's been a report that Butch Cassidy has returned to this area. As you may know, Pinkerton's has a standing reward for this man."

"Last I heard, Cassidy was someplace in South America."

"But he has ties to this area, to a horse ranch once owned by a Jesuit priest named Cleophas Jones."

Sheriff Weston bit the tip off a cigar and carefully lit it before he replied. "That was years ago, around '01. When the gang broke up, Jones just went away. He might be dead, for all I know. Fella named Seth Renfrew bought the land from the county along with his brothers."

"And now he's dead."

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The sheriff looked up in surprise. "Word gets around! That what brought you here?"

"We were thinking maybe Cassidy or Sundance killed him, to get some loot they left on the property."

That brought a snort from Weston. "Cassidy was never a killer, and he wasn't the sort to fool around with snakes. That's how Renfrew died, you know—bitten by half a dozen coral snakes on the face and neck. His face was all black and swollen. His own mother wouldn't have known him. Hell of a way to die."

"If Butch and Sundance didn't kill him, who did? Do you think the priest came back to reclaim his land?"

"You Pinkertons are all alike," the sheriff told him, his tone somewhere between amusement and anger. "Those people were gunmen. Whoever killed Seth Renfrew did a lot of thinkin' about it in advance. It sure wasn't an impulse killing. There are no coral snakes in Utah, Mr. Snow. The killer had to bring 'em from down south somewhere. That doesn't sound like Butch or Sundance to me, even if they're back in Utah—and I'm not convinced they are."

"Then who did kill him?"

"A lot of crazy people pass this way. Some of 'em hate the Mormons. Utah couldn't become a state until the Church discontinued polygamy, but some folks hereabouts still practice it."

"Did Renfrew have any wives?"

"Not that I know of. He was into lots of schemes, though. Mining ventures, mostly. And him and his brothers grew up in a Mormon family. They all had different mothers."

"Who found the body?"

"I did," the sheriff said. "Had a report of smoke coming from his place. Rode out to see what was going on. The snakes were still there by the body. Had to shoot them to get in."

"Mind if I go out and look around?"

"I'll take you if you really want to see it," Weston decided.

"You could just loan me a horse—"

"No horse. I'll take you in my motorcar."

The car proved to be an Oldsmobile, one of many models of automobiles and touring cars Ben saw with increasing frequency on the streets of Richmond. He and Tamia had even considered buying one, and probably would before long. They were no longer merely a rich man's toy. But riding along a western road in a sheriff's car would have been beyond his imagination just a decade earlier.

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The horse ranch where Seth Renfrew had died consisted of a series of corrals, grazing fields, and a large barn, in addition to the ranch house itself, a modest structure by western standards. Sheriff Weston led him first around the back and pointed out the remains of a fire. "This is where the smoke was coming from."

Ben kicked at the ashes. "Looks like clothing of some sort." He retrieved a charred piece of denim and brushed it off. "What was the dead man wearing?"

"Levi's, boots, a plaid shirt. After the funeral I gave it all to his niece. They were real close."

"He has a niece living here?"

"Sure, she's a teacher here. Ginny Renfrew's her name."

"I'll want to speak with her."

They went into the house and the sheriff showed him the kitchen where Renfrew had died. "His feet were still in the doorway. We think he walked out here and one of the coral snakes struck at his leg. Then he went down and the others got him. His six-gun was empty, recently fired."

Ben frowned, trying to conjure up the scene. "The killer probably didn't arrive on horseback."

"What makes you say that?"

"The snakes had to be in something, a box or a sack of some sort. Coral snakes aren't very large, but six of them are still a bundle. A box couldn't easily be carried on horseback, and if they were in a sack the killer risked the danger of them getting their fangs through it and biting him or his horse."

"We found a small box big enough for one snake," he told Ben. "It's still out here on the table."

Ben looked over the cardboard box, noting the bullet holes with powder burns around them. "There are smaller holes, too. Maybe air holes. Shouldn't you keep this box as evidence?"

"I took a note out of it. Crude drawing of a snake and the words *Next time*. Got it down at the office. I don't think the box tells us anything. We don't know when he got it."

"The table isn't damaged under the box," Ben observed. "But then it wouldn't be. Renfrew fired the shots into it outside, when he thought there was something alive in there. The killer planned it that way, hoping he'd empty his gun and not giving him time to reload. I think the box was delivered just before the killing."

He pointed at the broken kitchen window. "That the way you found it?"

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"Sure is! We didn't even pick up the glass."

"The killer arrived in a buggy or car, rather than on horseback. He left this box where Renfrew would see it and then circled around to the back of the house. Renfrew came out for the box, saw the air holes, and emptied his gun into it. He must have had reason to fear for his life. Meantime, the killer was back here breaking the kitchen window and dropping the coral snakes inside."

"Makes sense," the sheriff admitted.

"If Renfrew feared someone wanted to kill him, maybe his niece knew about it too."

"I talked to her already."

Ben smiled. "I think I'll have a try at her anyway, Sheriff."

Ginny Renfrew had a little white house with a picket fence around the yard, right at the edge of town. When Ben saw a horse and buggy tethered to the fence near the front door he figured she had a visitor. She came to the door with a slender blue-eyed man in his forties, dressed in a suit and necktie, with a derby in his hand. "Can I help you?" she asked Ben.

He showed his Pinkerton's card. "I wanted to ask you about your uncle's death."

"Come right in. Mr. Ryan was just leaving."

Ryan shook her hand and said, "It's been a pleasure, ma'am. I hope we can do business if things work out."

Ginny Renfrew watched him until he'd driven away and then closed the door. "This seems to be my day for visitors. Now what can I do for you, Mr. Snow?" She was a pretty young woman with blond hair, wearing a long skirt and blouse.

"The sheriff tells me you're a teacher here. My wife's a teacher back East."

She smiled, motioning him to a chair in her tiny sitting room. "There aren't many occupations for a woman out here. Teaching seemed the only one for me."

"I'm sorry about your uncle."

"We were very close. He was my father's half-brother. It was one of those Mormon things, you know. They had different mothers."

"Any idea who killed him? Or why?"

"I'm not even convinced it was murder. The family's always been crazy over snakes. He might have had them as pets."

"They keep poisonous snakes as pets?"

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"My father does. He collects them from all over the West. Maybe Seth did too."

"Coral snakes?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I think he has some."

"Would he have had any motive to harm his brother?"

"None of the brothers got along but I can't believe he'd do anything like this. I don't even know that he's back in town. I haven't seen him in months."

He heard the uncertainty in her voice. "Was there some rivalry over that horse ranch?"

Instead of answering directly she said, "My uncle Seth didn't want it for a horse ranch. He was after the mineral rights."

"What mineral rights?"

"Copper. There's copper near Salt Lake City and some people believe it might be here too. When the owner of that horse ranch disappeared and the county finally took it over, the three of them bought it together. But Seth moved in and pretty much got the place for himself."

Ben stood up. "What's your father's name? I think I should call on him."

"It's Ralph Renfrew, but I told you, he's not around right now. He's been down in Arizona on one of his snake-hunting expeditions."

"Maybe he came back without telling you."

"He wouldn't do that."

Ben remembered one of the reasons for his visit. "The sheriff told me he gave you Seth's clothes after the funeral. I wonder if I could see them."

She went into the bedroom and returned in a moment carrying some folded clothes, freshly washed, and a pair of boots. He held up the heavy denim pants and plaid shirt the sheriff had described. A name tag with "Seth Renfrew" on it was sewn into the back of each garment, a reminder of the dead man's youth in a house with several children. Some habits lasted a lifetime. "I thought they might fit my father," she explained, "if he ever comes back."

"I guess that's everything," he said, but at the door he paused and asked, "By the way, what did that Mr. Ryan want, if you'll forgive my asking?"

"He was interested in my uncle's ranch too. Wanted to know if it was going back on the market."

"Why would he ask you?"

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"My uncle and I were very close," she told him. "He made a will last year leaving his share of the ranch to me."

A few questions to the sheriff and some tradesmen around town confirmed that Ralph Renfrew hadn't been seen around in a couple of months, since long before his half-brother's death. No one thought his absence unusual. He was often away. Charles was the only brother available, so Ben sought him out at the feed store where he worked.

Charles Renfrew was a burly man of around fifty, with thinning hair and leathery skin. He wore a stained undershirt that revealed arms grown muscular from handling heavy feed sacks for so many years. "If you're here to ask about my brother's death, I don't know a thing about it," he said as soon as he saw the Pinkerton's card.

"But you and Ralph Renfrew both profit from his death, as I understand it. All three of you owned that ranch, and the mineral rights could be valuable."

"Or they could be worthless. I think Seth tricked us into investing in the place. There was no love lost between Seth and me. In a lot of Mormon families in the old days the kids grew up reflecting their mother's views. At least that's how it was in the Renfrew family. Me and Seth and Ralph were always trying to outdo each other, just like our mothers."

"You and Seth were both unmarried?"

"That's right. Ralph's the only one who married. His wife died of pneumonia some years back but he has a daughter here in town."

"Ginny. I've met her," Ben told him. "I understand she inherited Seth's share of the property."

"That's right. He always liked her." He bent to hoist a fifty-pound feed bag onto his shoulder, signifying that he considered the conversation to be nearing its end.

"I may come talk to you again," Ben told him. "Is it easier to catch you at home?"

The burly man snorted. "Right now, this is my home. Got a room in back where I sleep, till I get my finances straightened out."

As Ben was leaving the feed store he noticed a familiar figure checking the reins on his buggy across the street. He walked over and called to him. "Hello there, James. I met you earlier at Ginny Renfrew's house."

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The thin man with the blue eyes turned and smiled. "Snow, isn't it?"

"Ben Snow. I understand you're in the market for some property."

Ryan shrugged. "Looking around. Thinking about settling in this area but I haven't decided anything for sure."

"Ginny Renfrew's a nice young woman," Ben observed. "I'd hate to see someone take advantage of her."

"That's not going to happen. I understand she still has a father and uncle to look after her."

"Ralph Renfrew, the father, seems to be away. He collects snakes."

"I expect he'll be back," Ryan said.

"Know anything about coral snakes?" Ben asked him.

"Quite a bit. Spent some time down around the Mexican border. I heard about the Renfrew who was killed a few weeks back, but it couldn't have happened like they said."

Ben eyed him steadily. "I know that."

Ryan turned away. "Good seeing you again, Mr. Snow."

Ben watched him ride away in the buggy. It was almost evening and he needed food and a room for the night. He found one on the second floor of a local bar that also supplied him with a passable supper. Apparently they weren't used to having legitimate overnight guests because a woman knocked on his door around midnight and asked if he wanted company. He sent her away and settled into a restless sleep.

He came awake with a start, the morning sun streaming in his window and someone pounding on the door. When he opened it, Sheriff Weston was standing there. Ben tried to clear the cobwebs from his brain. "What time is it?"

"Nearly eight o'clock. Come on—there's been another killing."

"What?"

"Charles Renfrew. It was coral snakes again."

Renfrew had been found dead in the back room of the feed store where Ben had met him the previous afternoon. Sheriff Weston was called and had to kill three coral snakes found near the body. As with his half-brother Seth, the snakebites on Charles Renfrew's body seemed confined to his face and neck.

"Looks like he was killed last night," the sheriff guessed. "Body's already cold."

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"I left him around five-thirty," Ben said. "He was still working then."

Weston kicked at one of the dead snakes. "Killer'll be running out of serpents soon. They're not like bullets, where you can walk into the store and buy a fresh box."

"Six snakes the first time and three this time. He might have three more left for the remaining brother."

"Ralph Renfrew?" The sheriff scratched his head. "I been sort of thinking he might be the killer. There was no love lost in that family."

"And he liked snakes," Ben agreed, staring down at the body. "He might have sneaked back with a supply of corals from down south."

"We got a witness of sorts. Man across the road swears he saw someone in a snakeskin mask carrying a burlap sack around dusk."

"A snakeskin mask," Ben repeated.

"That's what he says. And a sackful of snakes."

Ben started for the door. "Keep me advised," he said.

"You still looking for Butch Cassidy?"

"I have an idea where he is."

Ben rode back out to the horse ranch where Seth Renfrew had died. He left his buggy down the road a bit and approached the ranch house from the side, through a stand of low brush. Then he darted across the last stretch to a woodshed at the rear of the house, hoping he hadn't been seen. The woodshed door was latched from inside, but he slid one of his Pinkerton cards between the door and its frame, lifting the latch with ease. As he'd hoped, the door into the kitchen was unlocked.

The house seemed empty as he moved quietly through it, and he was beginning to think he might be wrong in his reasoning. Then he saw the coral snake.

It was close to two feet long and had emerged from a half-ajar doorway that probably led to a root cellar. Ben drew his revolver and waited, but the snake showed no interest in him and headed under the sink instead. The cellar door swung open the rest of the way and Ben found himself facing the man in the snakeskin mask.

"You might as well take that thing off your face," he suggested. "I know who you are, and how you came to kill your two brothers."

The masked man lunged for him and Ben wasn't fast enough with his gun. He was caught off balance and toppled backward,

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landing near the sink with the killer on top of him. He turned his head and saw the coral snake not twelve inches from his face.

Then there was a single shot and the snake leaped in the air from the bullet's impact. The masked man was pulled off Ben and knocked unconscious by a hard swipe from a gun barrel. "Thanks," Ben managed to say as James Ryan helped him to his feet.

"I was hanging around here. Thought you could use some help. Who's this behind the mask?"

Ben reached over and pulled it off. "Seth Renfrew, the fellow who lived here."

"I thought he was killed by coral snakes."

"His half-brother Ralph, the snake collector, came back here with that intention, but as you told me yourself yesterday, it couldn't have happened the way people said. Coral snakes, though deadly, are also small and shy. Humans are usually bitten while handling them. Actually, they're so small and their fangs so short that it's almost impossible for them to strike and penetrate clothing. They could never penetrate boots or heavy pants like the victim was wearing, and the sheriff mentioned no leg wounds anyway."

"Then what happened?" Ryan asked.

"I think Ralph let the snakes into this house but they failed to do their job. When he came to investigate, Seth probably knocked him out and coaxed the snakes into biting his face and neck a few times. Death would have come fairly quickly after bites like that. Of course, the body was accepted as Seth's. It was in his house, and as half-brothers the two men looked something alike. Besides, the sheriff told me his face was all black and swollen from the poison. Weston said his own mother wouldn't have recognized him."

"Maybe not, but how'd you know it wasn't Seth?"

"Clothing had been burned out back, like the clothing the dead man was wearing. I wondered why, and then I learned that the half-brothers sewed name tags into their clothes, a habit left over from childhood. Seth wanted Ralph's body to pass for his own, so he had to dress it in his clothes and burn the clothes with Ralph's name tag in them. That not only told me the body wasn't Seth, it told me Seth was most likely the killer. He'd killed one half-brother who tried to kill him, so he decided to kill the other one too. Then the property and its mineral rights would be all his."

"How could he get it back if he was supposed to be dead?"

"Think about it," Ben said. "The two bodies would be identified as Seth and Charles, with Ralph still missing and suspected of the

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crimes. Seth's own share of the ranch would go to his favorite niece Ginny. If he could then figure a way to fake Ralph's death, the rest of the property would pass to Ginny too, as Ralph's daughter.

"Seth figured Ginny would front for him and give him most of the profits if copper was found."

Ryan stood there, the pistol still in his hand. "You know this place really belongs to me, don't you? To Cleophas Jones and me. He raised horses for me."

"I know," Ben said. "The Pinkertons told me James Ryan was an alias once used by Butch Cassidy."

The blue eyes sparkled. "You called me James yesterday afternoon when we saw each other, but Ginny Renfrew only introduced me as Mr. Ryan. I figured then that you knew who I was. I know who Ben Snow is too. I heard tell that Billy the Kid never really died. That would be some strange shoot-out between the two of us."

"No, it wouldn't. They say you never killed anybody, and I'm so old I tripped over my own feet earlier. This is the twentieth century, Butch. Our glory days are over. If you came here for buried loot, it's long gone, and you should be too. Get out of here before I change my mind."

On the floor Seth Renfrew was beginning to stir. Ben tossed the snakeskin mask back to him. "I guess this is yours, Seth."

He shook his head as if trying to clear it. "Ralph was wearing it when he came to kill me, only I got him instead."

"You should have quit after that one and called the sheriff. Even with the coral snakes you might have pleaded self-defense. Killing Charles too, that was dumb. That'll get you a hangman's noose."

He turned to look for James Ryan, but the blue-eyed man was gone.

Less than a week later Ben was back in Richmond with Tamia. "I solved a couple of murders," he said. "Pinkerton's seemed pleased about that. It's good for their reputation."

She smiled and put her arms around him. "I'm glad to have you back in one piece. What about Butch Cassidy?"

"Never saw him. I think he's still in South America."

Butch and Sundance returned to Bolivia in December of that year, taking jobs at the Concordia tin mine. One year later, after stealing the mine's payroll, they were finally killed by Bolivian soldiers.

Or perhaps they weren't. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

ONE DEAD CANARY

by David Delman

The times my daddy was off the sauce he was highly opinionated about how things worked. He's been gone now these past five years, but I can still hear that whiskey tenor of his passing on rules to live by.

Item: "Learn to handle yourself. Like yours truly, you're a little guy, and little guys have to be pugnacious. Brutes and little guys are natural enemies, and if you let them, the brutes'll stomp you."

So when I was about ten he enrolled me in his custom-tailored survival course. Lesson One: a demonstration of how, in his youth, he busted the jaw of a highly regarded light heavyweight brute with a handy roll of quarters he happened to have stashed on his person. (Lesson One A: *Anything* can be a weapon.)

Item: "Get hot music to come out of a brass horn, and you'll never have to work for a living."

So I was even younger, six, when he started leaving his second-

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best cornet on my pillow as he tucked me in nights. Next to my teddy bear. In case I wanted to jam with the sandman, he used to say.

Pugnaciously, I never have been the chip off the old block he hoped I'd be—I'm more the live-and-let-live type. On the other hand, I do play a pretty mean horn, if I do say so myself, and he was around long enough to be proud of that. Which is something it pleases me to be able to tell you.

If you're gathering that I was fond of the old boozer, you're right. And I miss him, almost as much as my mama does. Never mind she left home with a supermarket manager, who surprised me a whole lot by turning out to be a very nice type indeed, though he can't tell a riff from rice pudding.

Many authors test new characters in short stories before attempting a full-length novel. That appears to have been the case here, for David Delman tells us that his sleuth Gabey Yeager is the subject of his latest novel-in-progress, a World War II mystery involving "big bands, the craziness of the home front, and lots of colorful material." We think you'll agree that even at short-story length the author has captured the period.

She took off when I was fourteen, begging me to come with her. But I wouldn't. Couldn't. Which she knew, since who else would watch over the old man.

Incidentally, he never blamed her for anything. He knew he hadn't left her much choice.

Item: "Bullies are the worst form of brute, Gabe."

Tapping his unbully-looking chest: "Never give a bully an even break."

"Hey, Pops, you're not a bully."

"I'm a screwup. A screwup is a bully inside out. A screwup is a bully who pretends he isn't. Or that he can't help himself. Gabe, my lad, your mama stood for my kind of bullying longer than was good for any of us."

Gabe. That's me, in case you were wondering. (Gabe, for Gabriel, my daddy's jokey name for the trumpet whiz he told the world I'd be, though at the time I was playing minor keys in Mama's womb.) Gabe Yeager, horn-blowin' son of the legendary Doc.

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But the question is—What was all this ancient history doing top side of my mind as the Charley Wilson Swing-Timer Special sped south to New York City? It had been a gig-jammed ten-day tour up and down New England—now about to end with a Saturday night appearance in Brooklyn's Roseland Ballroom.

Usually a touring bus affects me like a Mickey Finn. I mean, I'm zonked ten minutes after the instruments are packed and loaded and we're off to wherever.

But not this time.

So I tell myself a mess of stuff in explanation. New to the band, for instance. Not that I'm exactly little boy lost here. I know most of my fellow sidemen either personally or by rep. Hell, I've been tootin' horns in fast company since '36—Jack Jenney's old outfit to begin with, who you just might remember played an even sweeter trombone than Dorsey. And hotter than Teagarden, if you ask me.

That's six full years of the life. Enough to make me a veteran at the ripe old age of twenty-four.

Some think, incidentally, that "the life" doesn't have much more to go before it runs out the string. Earlier this evening Hank Ruggierri, our bassist, was saying the war's going to change things very soon. And very much.

"No gas, no buses, no gigs," Foots Benton (tenor sax) chimed in.

"Hey, man," Hank says right back at him, "no *players*. You're in the army now. Da-da-da-da-da-da."

Hank was the one told me there were openings with Wilson, promising I'd like the way Charley runs his show. I'd been chafing under a commercially successful leader who sometimes forgot the difference between a band and a chain gang. All right, not that bad. But pretty bad.

Charley's famous for being hands off and when he said, "Keep your lip healthy and your nose clean, kid, and you'll hear from me mostly on payday," that went down smooth.

At least it did then, the day we hired on. (We meaning me and Foots Benton, who broke out because I did.) But life can sure take some cockeyed swerves. Now, maybe I wouldn't mind if Charley did engage in a bit of buttinsky. Charley or anybody.

The thing of it is, while Hank was filling me in on all the happy stuff about our leader, he neglected to pass along word one about our leader's brother.

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And believe me, there's an encyclopedia you could compile on that cat.

Two brothers so different. Charley Wilson a pal to everybody. That is, as long as you're no threat to the Swing-Timers. Which is to say, his source of income. Charley loves rich food, fine wine, expensive cigars, and showy women. With those items tucked away safe, he glad-hands the world.

Buddy Wilson wouldn't glad-hand an angel of mercy. Four years the younger. Four light-years meaner.

I guess I really don't blame Hank much for not dotting all the i's. Only a couple of weeks from going into the service, he's got *der Führer* on the brain. Still, if he'd managed to drop a hint or two . . .

But I'm getting ahead of the beat here.

Rummm . . . rummm . . . rummm . . . You know, you could riff on the muffled sound of the motor and the whine of tires on the highway. Outside of that night music, nothing but quiet on the Swing-Timer.

Charley's Swing-Timer, but no Charley among us. He's somewhere on the road up ahead, comfy in his big, chauffeur-driven limousine. Band leaders have it soft. Ah, hell, I'm not complaining. Charley pays me good, and lets me do what I love to do, make jivey music.

Charley's got company—Buddy and Pretty Kitty Kittridge, our canary.

Buddy because he's not welcome on the Swing-Timer, and he knows it. He doesn't have pal one here.

Kitty because . . . well, because she's sort of Buddy's wife. Sort of? Hang on a bit. You'll see what I mean.

The Swing-Timer reading lamps are out now—Hank and Foots, and the other guys, settled down for whatever winks they can catch. Five-thirty A.M. Only the occasional car on the road. NYC still two hours away.

But me? I'd have needed weights to drag the old lids into sleeping position.

And so I got my trumpet down from the rack and played ghost tunes (silent music) on it. In between sets, I carried on this hot inner debate as to whether or not it made sense to invest in Ziggy Elman's extra flügelhorn, which he'll let me have at a price.

Also, all right, I admit it, I did a bit of wondering about Pretty Kitty. Wherever she was, was she wide awake, too?

And so on and so forth before finally coming to terms with the

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fact that new-to-the-job had nothing to do with my pop-eyed condition. Blame Buddy the Brute, if I was going to be honest.

Bernard "Buddy" Wilson, pianist-arranger for his brother's outfit. And, according to him, the best who ever tickled ivory.

I'll give him this. I don't know three tempo men who are better. He owns, as they say, ears. He can read and transpose anything.

And is he ever the master tunesmith. His arrangements are maybe the main reason Charley made it to the real big money last year—band number one in the polls, topping both the important fan magazines.

No question, Buddy's a talent. But the thing of it is, he's also nutsy. Listen hard here, please. I'm not just tossing the word around. Buddy's bats. Once I would have said anybody who can write and play elegant music can't be all bad. But Buddy is. Born bad maybe. Who the hell knows.

Foots and I debate this. It's not like me to exaggerate, he says. He says he knows for a fact that Buddy had one of those moms who overprotected and underdisciplined. So spoiled rotten, he'll grant, but that's as far as he'll go.

Foots says Charley makes sense when he tells everybody it's a matter of learning how to handle his brother.

"Do what I do," Foots says. "Laugh at him."

Uh-huh.

Foots (Albert for real) didn't come by his nickname accidentally. He's built like a mountain, size twelves in proportion. We don't exactly share a perspective, I tell him.

Like, for instance, the first time Buddy saw me his eyes lit up. "Meat," you could almost hear him thinking.

And of course what complicated matters was Pretty Kitty. I mean her eyes lit up, too.

Don't get me wrong here. I'm no Valentino, but Kitty and me, we go back together.

She may not be the earliest friend I can remember, but she's up there among the top three.

Doc once carved a wooden trumpet for her. I think it was for her eighth birthday.

Kitty's old man, Harry, and Doc sat next to each other for a while in Paul Whiteman's brass section. And Pretty Kitty and I sat next to each other for about half the fifth grade.

Anyway, there's me ambling into the rehearsal hall that first day, there's Kitty at the piano, there's Buddy alongside—they'd

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been going over something new he was adding to the Swing-Timer charts—and when she broke off in mid chorus Buddy noticed all right.

What you should understand about Pretty Kitty is she's never been a canary who goes up easily. She cut her eye teeth on this business. She's not Jo Stafford or Helen Forrest yet—she'll be the first to tell you that—but she does know her way around thirty-two bars. The Lindy hoppers like her a lot. And it's a following that's getting her talked about.

Old times, the Doc and Harry days, is all we were gabbing about a week or so later—nothing torchy, honest—when Buddy decides it's time for the cat to make life miserable for the canary and all her acquaintanceship.

"Pretty Kitty is off limits." In that voice of his he deliberately sinks a decibel or so because he thinks it intimidates. (Well, it does. A little.)

We hadn't seen him come into the hall, and so we both jumped. Me higher than Pretty Kitty, I got to admit, though her face stiffened in a way that underscored what was general knowledge—that she and Buddy were a definite dissonance.

I should say here that Buddy is matinée-idol handsome. Chiseled features, pale skin, pitch-black eyes, blue-black hair, a cleft in his chin. And yet somehow none of it signifies. To me, he always looks like party of the first part in one of those vampire movies.

Except healthier, being that he stands six-two and maybe two-thirty, two-forty. Which means there's better than half a foot and upwards of a hundred pounds more of him than yours truly. And as for Pretty Kitty, yours truly can eat an apple off her head. Nice shape to go with blue eyes and honey-blondness, but she is pocket-size.

The guys were on a break, so there wasn't anyone in the hall but the three of us. Not that their presence would have cooled Buddy down any. He heats up for an appreciative audience.

"She's taken," he said, guarding against the possibility that I'm deaf or stupid and hadn't latched on to his meaning the first time. "In case you didn't notice, there's a ring on her finger."

"There's no such thing," she said, holding the bare finger up for all to see. "And I'll thank you not to go around saying there is. I gave it back months ago, but it suits your warped sense of humor to make believe I didn't."

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Buddy grinned, but not at her. It was like she hadn't spoken, like she wasn't even there. The grin was an arrangement just for me. A shark's grin. And I'd be lying if I didn't confess my mouth went dry.

"There's a ring on her finger," he repeated. "There always will be."

Kitty sucked in her breath. "Stop it, stop it, stop it," she said in one of those harsh whispers you can't tell apart from a scream. But she couldn't keep the shimmy out of her voice.

The shark's grin widened and remained in place during a stretched-out, bone-chilling silence. And then, could you believe it, he winked. In the next instant he was gone, leaving Kitty and me to gulp at each other. And pretend we weren't doing it.

But I guess yesterday morning was when it all came to a head. Back up a step to me rehearsing a few cadenzas and arpeggios and such and suddenly realizing that Kitty had been watching and listening for some time. I lowered the horn.

"Don't stop, Gabe. I swear you even looked like Doc. His way of bending slightly at the knees when he went for it big. Made me feel funny."

"Funny bad?"

"No, no. Like I was a child again. Play me some more."

I did. I'd been noodling a couple of old standards, blending themes, running away from them, then sneaking back, you know, that freewheeling, jivey, jazzy stuff. And with her standing there I found a killer-diller way to take it all home.

When I was finished she was smiling. "Your daddy would have loved it that you sound so much like him."

"You think I do?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I'm not there yet, you know. I can't make my horn growl the way he could his. And damn if I can hit E above C above high C the way he could."

"You will."

I grinned. "That's a promise?"

She grinned, too. "And a promise is for keeps." Which is something we used to say to each other as fifth-graders. But then the fun faded from her face. So that when I turned and found Buddy leaning against the door jamb I wasn't surprised.

"I hate it when you sneak up on me," Kitty said. "You follow me

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around and sneak up on me, and it gives me the shivers. If it doesn't stop I'll tell Charley, I swear I will."

He lifted his hands in mock fear.

She said something under her breath and ran out. And as she went by me I could see she was fighting tears.

"Hey, man, why don't you back off?"

He shook his head pityingly. "I guess I do have to spell it out for you, Gabe boy. All right, here goes. Words of one syllable. Kitty belongs to me."

"I hear it's over."

"Oh? From who? From her?"

"From around. I hear she stayed with the band this tour only because Charley got down on his knees and begged her. I hear it's a split just waiting for final papers."

Moving fast for such a big man, he had a handful of my shirt in his fist before I could blink twice. Easy as pie, he levered me back and forth in time to his bringing clarity to our situation.

"Final papers? Uh-uh. There are no final papers. There's only the once and final truth. Which is, she belongs to me whether she likes it or not." He shoved me away from him, hard, so that only the wall kept me from falling. Then, while I collected for reassembling the pieces of myself that had been knocked apart, he studied me as if I were something in a high-school biology experiment. "She's mine, Gabey-Wabey. Either that, or she's dead. D-E-A-D. She knows that. And now so do you." He made a pretend gun barrel out of the index finger of his right hand. "Pow!" he said. "One dead canary." Liking the sound of that, he added, "Pow! Pow! And maybe one dead horn player to go along."

I moved to ease by him, but I could tell he wasn't going to let me, being as he was still in his pull-the-wings-off-the-flies mindset. So I was glad indeed to see Foots and Charley coming back into the rehearsal room.

Charley's big, too. But there the brotherly resemblance ends. I mean, Charley's eyes are normal, as opposed to black and beady like a snake's.

He'd been laughing at something Foots was saying, but he broke it off as soon as he saw us. "What's going on?" Staring hard.

Buddy didn't look nearly as concerned as I hoped he would.

"Gabe, here, just got enlightened," he said. "That's all. Nothing for you to get excited about, Big Brother."

I opened my mouth but discovered I didn't have anything to say,

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so I shut it again. And then watched Charley do the same. I got the sinking feeling Charley felt pretty helpless confronting Buddy. After which I got the follow-up feeling that that one had built a career on making people feel helpless. He had the chords down pat.

"Buddy, why don't you just go off somewhere and write something brilliant?" Charley said tiredly.

"Hey, Big Brother, why the hell not." Then, turning his body so that Charley couldn't see, he gave me the finger-gun again. And mouthed: "One dead canary," as he left.

Charley followed him, but at the door he stopped. He looked back at me. "Whatever that was about . . ." He broke off. "The thing is, I promised our old lady . . ." Again he broke off.

"Ah, the hell," he said and went out.

Foots was whistling something tuneless through his teeth. "Maybe you're right," he said.

I looked at him.

"Could be that cat is actually crazy."

Great. My stomach was doing flip-flops.

The lullaby of the bus got to me finally, and I must have been hip-deep in Dreamville, because I didn't know Buddy was in the next seat until he stage-whispered my name.

I sat up straight.

"You haven't been good, Gabey. You didn't take a certain lesson to heart. Kitty says you've been forcing your attentions on her."

"Kitty said that?"

He mimicked me. " 'Kitty said that?' Yeah, she did, Gabey-Wabey. She didn't much want to, but the truth will out. And so . . ." He broke off. "Hey, look what I got."

No finger-gun this time. It was large, shiny-black, ugly, and scary as hell. "The famous Colt forty-five," he said. "The gun that tamed the West."

"Put that thing away."

"Why? Does it make you nervous?"

"Just put it away. Keep waving it around like that, and somebody could get hurt."

"Somebody . . . could . . . get . . . hurt." He giggled. "Mind like a steel trap, Gabe, boy."

And now I noticed how excited he was. His voice—though a bit higher pitched than usual—had seemed steady enough, but he

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couldn't keep his hands from dancing. And those ebony eyes had a gleam in them that made "Is he on something?" a natural question.

"Where the hell did you come from?" I asked. Not because I really wanted to know. But just for the sake of something to say that might distract him.

He made a vague motion toward the back of the bus. "I was a stowaway." Suddenly he placed the gun barrel against my nose. "Tell me what you smell."

I pushed the barrel away.

Instantly, it was back.

"It's been fired," I said.

"Yeah, " he said, drawing the word out in a long sigh of satisfaction. "It has been, hasn't it? At who?"

"I don't know. How could I?"

"Guess."

I kept silent, though my stomach was in its flip-flop mode again.

Another giggle. "All right, let's come at it this way. Charley ordered me to be brilliant, remember? And since I live to obey Big Brother, I wrote this tune we're going to be adding to the charts. Only Pretty Kitty won't be singing it. Guess why."

I kept silent.

I saw his thumb move to the hammer, heard the smooth click of metal as it reached the firing position, and thought there'd never been a sound I liked less.

"Talk to me, Gabe."

Well, I didn't. That was when the bubble burst. Or the last straw did its work. Or the worm turned. Whatever you want to call it. A voice made it happen. Not Buddy's mean, taunting twang, but a voice from the past—my old man's: "If you let them, they'll stomp you."

That was one thing. *"Anything's* a weapon," that was the other. I slammed my trumpet across the bridge of Buddy's nose. He screamed, dropped the gun that tamed the West, and though he showed no inclination to go after it, I hammered his wrist out of sheer cussedness.

The commotion that followed was considerable, to say the least. What with Buddy howling, and, well, yeah, there was some blood, too . . .

We played the gig that night. The detour to the emergency room cost us three, four hours, and by the time we ate, cleaned up, and

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dressed, there wasn't much time to rehearse. But the kids didn't seem to mind. They thought we were killer-diller. And we were.

I mean, we played that night like we were inspired, like ten-pound sacks had been lifted off seventeen weary backs.

Charley doubled on baton and piano. Not in Buddy's class as a technician, he played like he had something to prove. And he was perfect. We all felt it. We felt like we'd been sewn together, seamlessly, one unit, a super-team—maybe the best band there ever was. That night we loved our sound and ourselves, and never wanted to stop playing.

Two days later Charley called us into his office. He was behind that big desk of his, Buddy sitting next to him, swathed in enough bandages to tickle me pink.

Charley didn't take long to give us the bad news, which incidentally came as no surprise. Obviously it was Buddy or us. And just as obviously—keeping in mind Charley's priorities—it wasn't going to be Buddy.

After delivering that line about what he'd promised his mother, Charley muttered, "The thing is, you never learned how to handle him." Indicating his brother.

"Sure I did," I said.

The grin broke loose for a moment before Charley remembered what was what. Then he stomped it quick and handed us each an envelope which on later inspection turned out to be very okay.

Buddy never said a word. Since I had my trumpet along, I thought for a moment of going right up to him to blow a big forget-me-not blast in his left eardrum, but I didn't.

Us? You've been wondering, maybe, who us is? Thinking, maybe, it might have been Foots and me?

Nah! My guess is you had it nailed.

Right—waiting at the depot when the bus pulled in that night was this Pretty Kitty Kittridge. (Final papers a week in the future.) Who was jumping up and down with relief when she saw me. "Gabe! Oh God, Gabe! He told me . . . he made me sniff that . . . I thought you . . ."

I knew exactly what she thought. I'd had the same stomach-flipping thought about her.

But then she stopped talking and was all over me with kisses, hugs, and a bunch of little pinches—one lively dead canary. ●

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THE LOOKER

by Alison White

He used to find the train journey to work boring. Thirty-five minutes of nothing. Reading didn't stop the monotony. But then he discovered his power—he'd had it all this time without realising!

He'd never had much success with women. With anybody really. He was the sort of person nobody noticed; he was just there in the crowd. Until he started *looking*.

And he'd only wanted to look unnoticed to begin with. The first time a woman had caught him staring, he'd felt embarrassed. But somehow that gave way when he saw how irritated she looked. Good God, she hadn't woken up that way, with her hair curled and makeup perfectly applied—she wanted to be looked at! She had four reactions, that first woman, and the others since then had been just the same. First was surprise, second was irritation, third, when they realised he wasn't going to stop staring, was concern—that was when he began to feel his power, as a slow tingle in his spine. But the fourth reaction was best of all. Real empowerment. Fourth was fear.

They were afraid of him. That felt good. He had become somebody. Now he looked forward to commuting. *Looking* had become a sport and he was Olympic standard.

Of course, he was not indiscriminate. He chose women of a certain type. The glamorous, uncaring types who would normally blank him out completely. And of course they were never in any real danger. *He* knew he wasn't going to do anything.

Even choosing them was fun. Commuters were creatures of

With more than seventy short stories to her credit, many of which have been broadcast on BBC radio, Alison White recently began work on her first mystery novel. Although she enjoys working in several different genres, mystery has been her favorite, she says, since about the age of eleven, when she discovered Agatha Christie. ¶

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habit. Once they found a regular job, most stuck to the same train in the morning. His starting time was flexible, so he straddled the peak hours, cruising for his victims. Checking out their ride was easy. As long as they joined the train after him—which meant, going home, they would leave the train first—then they were prime meat.

He'd spotted a potential one this morning. Her first time on this route into the city, at least he thought so. All he'd seen as she hurried onto the platform beneath a large black umbrella was a pair of long legs and a grape-coloured coat blowing open in the wind. He'd not seen that coat before. Then when she'd got on the train, she had been smiling. To herself.

Smug. That's what it was. Probably thinking about some lover she had dangling. But you could bet if *he* tried looking at her she'd start the reaction cycle. She'd be irritated. Until he carried on.

He hadn't meant to *look* on her first day. But it was that smile. He couldn't tear his eyes away. What, on a blustery, rainy morning like this, did she have to be so pleased about, for God's sake? It wasn't normal.

That was when she'd really baffled him. She'd glanced up and caught his eye. Seen him looking at her. And smiled even further. Right at him. Not a sarcastic sneer. A genuine smile.

Then she'd looked out of the window and carried on smiling all the way into the city. Clearly she was mad. She got off at the same stop as him, but he lost her in the crowds as everyone poured out of the railway subway into the busy city streets.

At work, once more he faded into the background. Processing motor insurance claims was interesting work for your first week. After that, there wasn't an excuse that you hadn't read and the day became routine. He'd given up trying to share the more amusing ones, such as, "The tree was a misleading shape and I reversed into it," with his colleagues. They laughed together but were bored by him. Story of his life. Except when he was on a train, of course.

Even now, the two who worked nearby were sniggering about something. He shuffled papers on his desk and strained his ears. They were talking about him.

"I told her to watch out for Dave, the looker." More guffaws.

Actually he *was* a looker. But not in the way they meant.

They were talking still.

"Transferred from a branch in the North, apparently. She can check my particulars any day."

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They were talking about the new claims clerk; he hadn't seen her yet and glanced over in the direction they were nodding. And that's when he got a shock. It was the woman from the train this morning. Smiling at Betty as she bought a coffee from her trolley.

Without thinking, he propelled himself out of his seat and over there, the urge for coffee suddenly unbearable.

"Good morning," he said, and waited for her to recognise him.

"Sorry," she shrugged, "it's a blur of faces and names right now," and turned back towards her desk.

His throat was tight when he sat down and he put the coffee cup to his lips, barely tasting the liquid as he swallowed it. Blur of faces and names! It wasn't even here that they'd met! Worse than that, though, she hadn't rated him. He could have been anybody—her superior, team leader—and she hadn't bothered to stay and find out. She'd written him off with one glance. After that smile on the train this morning too. Obviously that meant nothing. He was a nobody again.

He left early, running a fictitious errand on his way out. The truth was, he didn't want to run into her on the train again and have her undermine him. Snooty bitch. He needed to think about this one.

But as the train doors closed, she came hurtling onto the platform and with the pleading look she threw at the guard, the doors opened again.

Smiling still, she threw herself into a corner seat in the opposite bay and closed her eyes. He'd give her one more chance. Surely now, after meeting twice in one day, she'd recognise him?

He willed her to look his way when her eyes opened, but she stared out of the window for a while. God knows why, it was dark, all she could see was her own reflection. Perhaps she liked looking at herself. Most women did. When she finally did look his way there was no smile of recognition. She was yawning.

She fished in her bag and produced a glossy magazine which she read, not looking up for the rest of the journey.

He was so angry, his breath was quickening with the humiliation of it. He got off a stop early to avoid a further opportunity for her to ignore him. Arrogant bitch! What was she doing playing with people? All smiles this morning, coyness in the office, and now ignorance at night! Just who the hell did she think she was?

All this time, *looking* had worked on commuters if they hadn't known him. They couldn't humiliate him, wouldn't attempt to while they were scared. But she neither recognised that she knew

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him nor was scared! What she was doing was stripping him of power. And he didn't like it. Not one bit. He was no longer a nobody. And she would realise that and be sorry. She'd notice him, all right. Would learn that he was not as forgettable as she first thought.

He began by ignoring her. Making himself catch an earlier train in the mornings and evenings, so there was no chance of running into her. He watched her working at her desk, gradually getting familiar with the surroundings and more confident with those around her. He noticed that she bought the same things from the tea trolley in the mornings yet did not indulge in the afternoon.

One afternoon when she was away from her desk he repeated her morning order and left it on her blotter. Black unsweetened tea and a chocolate cream biscuit. Contrary. Rather like she was herself.

When she came back she didn't bat an eyelid, just started to drink the tea. Arrogance!

He wasn't sure what made him do it, but a few minutes later he picked up the phone. "I'm watching you," he said, and hung up. She looked round, but his head was bent over his desk adding up figures on his calculator. After a minute or two she carried on working but she left the tea and the biscuit where they were.

Later in the afternoon he passed by her desk. "Settling in?"

She looked up and smiled briefly. As he looked at her intently he could see it was superficial. Her eyes had glanced at him and found him wanting.

"Yes, thank you. Although I'm very busy." She pointed at the piles of paperwork on her desk.

She might just as well have said, "Dismissed."

Later he rang her again. "I'm watching you," he said once more.

At her desk she held her hair back from her face as she wrote. Why bother wearing her hair like that if it was a nuisance? To be noticed, of course. Selectively. If she didn't like who noticed her, they would be dismissed. As he had been. She had been tossing her hair about like a supermodel before when the manager went by.

Yet at least they'd spoken. Now she might remember him on the train. Certainly she couldn't dismiss him there. Tonight was the night for *looking* he decided. How she responded would determine her treatment in future.

When she finally put on the grape-coloured coat and took her umbrella from the stand near the door, he followed her. All the way to the station he stayed far back so as not to be noticed, yet close enough to see what she was doing. Once, she turned round and scanned the crowd, but her eyes didn't register him. He had

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mixed feelings about that. But time for the real test later.

On the platform he stood a little away from her, reading the paper; she paid little attention to anyone else, a slight smile on her lips. What the hell was the matter with her? When the train came he got in the same carriage but stayed back. A few stops down the line when the train emptied out was when he'd move in for the kill, so to speak.

But watching her sitting there with that silly half-grin, he found he couldn't wait that long. He moved into the same bay as her, but on the opposite side. When she looked up he smiled in a friendly way. Now was her chance to make amends. She looked away again.

When she glanced back a few minutes later, he was not smiling but glaring. She stared out of the window.

The train stopped and the carriage emptied except for the two of them. She darted a quick look at him.

"Hello."

"Good evening." Her tone was cold. She wasn't afraid of him. She was irritated. Well okay, but even now didn't she recognise him? What was he in the office, the invisible man?

"Did you enjoy your tea this morning?"

She did not respond. Bitch.

The train continued with its rhythm; she contemplated her fingernails.

"You do know we work together," he said at last, hating himself for the explanation. He shouldn't have to do that.

"Yes," she said. "I've seen you in the office. Goodnight." She stood and walked towards the door of the train as it pulled into the next station. It wasn't even her stop!

The doors were almost closed when he pulled them apart and leapt onto the platform. Seen him in the office? Why ignore him then? What was she playing at? She glanced back as she showed her ticket to the collector at the barrier and then he saw what he wanted on her face all at once. Right to step three. Recognition, irritation, and concern.

He should have stopped then. But he wanted step four from her now. He wanted fear.

So she thought she could just cut him off, did she? She knew they worked together but she wasn't interested in a conversation on a train? He didn't matter? But he did. He'd show her.

She had got off the train early deliberately to avoid him. Not because she was scared. She was too bloody arrogant for that. She just couldn't be bothered and thought it would solve the problem.

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But it hadn't. And now she would know he was worth rating.

He followed her out of the station. The road was blocked off with roadworks, the workmen gone for the day now, and some joker had moved some of the signs, so he'd stepped into a hole and he tutted with annoyance as mud splashed onto his shoes. That was her fault. Probably her own shoes would be spoiled too. That would serve her right for leaving at an unfamiliar stop.

Obviously no one would be waiting to meet her at her usual stop, otherwise she wouldn't have got off in that stupid dramatic gesture of hers. Most people would have just changed carriages. Although of course he would have followed her.

He stayed close behind, getting closer when he realised she hadn't bothered to look back. Now she was turning to walk along the narrow road at the side of the railway, probably heading for the bus stop there. But he could catch a bus too. It was a free country. Then as his step quickened she turned and saw him.

That was it. That was what he wanted. He actually felt his heart start to race as he saw her footing falter. It was too dark to see the look in her eyes but the change in tread told him all he needed to know. At last! Fear!

It was pitch black on that stretch of road, and starting to rain again; she went to put up her umbrella, struggling against the wind, but she didn't stop. No, she didn't want to stop! Now he felt elated. She was *SCARED.*

Heading towards the railway level crossing now, she turned back again. He smiled at her, a wide grin. A solitary car went past, the headlights casting their beam, and there she was, lit up, like a frightened rabbit, wondering what to do next.

Go for your bus, my pretty one! Now that you have seen me! Just let me *look* at you! She carried on walking towards the crossing, there was nowhere else to go, then the alarms went off and the arms of the crossing came down. She had to stop.

But she didn't! He stared in amazement as she moved further along the road, to where the embankment was netted off, and watched as she tried to get through the gap in the netting. Everyone knew it was there. On the train in the mornings they sometimes saw foolhardy children slip through and walk along. Was that what she planned?

He panicked now. Wait! But of course he wasn't speaking, only in his head. She was looking from side to side. At the train coming in the distance and then back at him. With a flash of clarity he knew what she was thinking. Here, she was out of his way, when

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the train passed she could cross to the other side before him, but it was ridiculous. The train was coming. Good God, what was she thinking of? If it was the express, it wouldn't be slowing down to stop at the station. The speed it came through could knock her off her feet!

He had to stop her. Stupid woman. Breathless, the cold wind biting into him, he squeezed through the netting himself, swearing as he tore his hand on the wires. Bloody kids. The hole was too small for him, and he sucked the blood from his knuckles.

The train was closer now, roaring down the track, the signal lights had changed to allow it to pass through. It *was* the express! And she was still making her way along the embankment, slippery with the rain, still trying to hold her umbrella. That didn't help her balance.

"Wait!" he called. "Wait!"

When she turned back he saw what only minutes earlier had pleased him. Fear. More than that. Blind terror. But he didn't want to see it now. He had only wanted to *look,* for God's sake. He hadn't wanted this.

"Stop!"

"Get away from me!" Her voice was a whimper.

"Come here, for God's sake!"

But his words were drowned out by the noise of the engine. All she could see was him running at her, shouting, and she lost her footing in fright as she stepped back.

For him then, time seemed to run in slow motion, and with flickering white light, like the slides of a horrible grotesque film, as the lights of the train bore down and she fell down the bank, clutching wildly . . . her mouth wide open and screaming . . .

He tried to shout, but no words came out, and then the film speeded up as the train rushed past him, its force sending him flying, but he grabbed hold of the wire netting and flung his face and body down onto the bank, gripping the wire as it passed.

Seconds later, the train's brakes squealed as it came to a halt on the track and he realised part of the noise that rushed in his ears was his own voice sobbing, over and over, *I only wanted to* look.

As he lifted his head and spat grass and muddy soil from his mouth, his face was wet with tears and sweat. Her umbrella lay on the embankment inches away from him, where the train had smashed it upwards. The shreds of its black material flew in panels in the screaming wind like death birds. And he knew he could *look* no more. ●

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Art by Shirley Chan

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

by William Link

A woman sat down on his leg, crying, her breath raw with tequila.

Startled, the old man jerked away and went over to the cell door. Behind him in the darkness a dozen other prisoners sprawled on the floor, some singing, others watching high stars through the barred windows.

There was no one who could help him. He had never made any friends in this strange city; at first it was the language barrier and later the feeling that he was a culturally displaced person. Now he understood how the bull felt in the *corrida*, circled by thousands of tormentors.

"Señor . . . ?"

He blinked. A Mexican policeman was looking in at him through the bars.

"Yes?"

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"There is someone to see you."

Someone to see him? But that was impossible—no one cared. He was only a face behind the counter of his watch shop, an old man drinking pulque mixed with fruit juice in the neighborhood cantinas.

The policeman unlocked the door and the cell immediately erupted with groans and pleas. "Quiet!"

He was led blindly down a tiled corridor where birds sang in cages, niched in the wall like patron saints in the churches.

The *New York Times* once called William Link and his writer-producer partner Richard Levinson the "Mr. Rolls" and "Mr. Royce" of television—apt descriptions, for together they created dozens of TV's best-loved programs. But Mr. Link is also a distinguished Broadway playwright and the winner of several awards for his short stories and novels. This new tale is his third for *EQMM*.

There was another bird in the little yellow room where his journey ended. It stared up balefully at him from its cage and he knew how it felt.

"Uno momento," the policeman said. He went out and closed the door.

The room was almost barren; not even the sound of a clock. Just plain wooden chairs, a table, and the bird. Were they going to interrogate him again, those two detectives in cheap summer suits who had come to his apartment hours ago?

The door suddenly opened and a young man entered. He was almost handsome in a dark-complected, heavy-lidded way. There was something Old World about him, formal; his bearing was oddly erect. The slight smile was solemn, almost judicial.

"I—don't believe I know—?" the old man began. He was sure he had never seen him before. The blue wool suit and vest were expensive, and much too warm for the hot evening. There was a gold watch on his wrist, an Omega, and a gold wedding band on his finger. Was he a customer, someone who had brought in a watch for repair? No . . . people with money took their fine timepieces to the elegant shops on the Reforma.

"I hope you've been treated well," the young man said. He

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opened a silver case of American cigarettes and offered it.

"Thank you, no. The treatment has been all right."

"Good." He lit a cigarette with a silver lighter and smoked silently for a few moments, contemplating the bird.

The old man swallowed. "You—you are with the police?"

Another smile. "Hardly. I'm a lawyer."

"Oh." This was still no explanation. What was a well-dressed attorney doing at a jail at this late hour?

"You seem puzzled."

The old man shrugged, embarrassed.

"I'd like to help you. Legally." When he received no reaction he said, "You do want help, don't you?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

Nodding, the young man carefully hitched his trousers and sat down on the edge of the table. The cigarette, forgotten, was left burning in a corner of his mouth while he removed a piece of paper from his pocket. He studied it, then: "You don't have a police record, at least their files don't show any."

"I have never been in trouble before. That is why I cannot understand this terrible thing they say about . . ." He broke off, his mouth trembling. He turned his head away so the other man could not see his wet eyes.

"I know how you feel and I believe you. That's why I'm going to get you out of this."

He looked back now with utter disbelief. No one in this country had ever helped him, given him even a moment of their time or attention. Sometimes, in his dreams, he saw himself standing alone with only his shadow on a glaringly white street.

"Do you have any friends here in Mexico City, someone who could give you a character reference?"

He looked down at his hands; a tiny sliver of jeweler's dust shone in one of the deep creases. "No. No one." Almost guiltily he added: "I left Europe after my wife died—I have no other family, so—so I wandered for many years. . . ." The explanation sounded disreputable, as if he were homeless. Why had he volunteered it?

The young man tapped the birdcage. "You admit meeting the woman?"

He nodded. A siren rose and fell outside. He remembered leaving the cantina, his movements sluggish with drink, and seeing a young girl leaning against a wall. She was no more than a child, with rich blue-black hair and tiny breasts like stones in the thin

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sweater. A little dog yapped at her bare brown legs, but he had doubted if it was hers.

The lawyer said, "Had you ever seen her before?"

"No. Never." She had smiled shyly at him, not even provocatively, and for some reason he had crossed over to her, smiling back.

"You knew she was a prostitute?"

The old man shook his head. "No. She was just a girl . . . a lonely girl. I—I felt sorry for her . . . all alone, no friends . . ."

"But you had been drinking."

"Just a few glasses." The man's tones reminded him of the detectives, their relay of questions, their accusations. "I wondered why she was not at the dance halls with the other young people."

The lawyer lowered his eyes. "There wasn't anything . . . sexual in your regard for this girl?"

"I was seventy-six last month, señor."

A slow nod. "Why did you walk along with her? You were seen by one of her girlfriends, you know."

It was difficult to say. Probably the drinks had numbed his shyness and he had wanted to delay returning to the monotony of his tiny room. He was even blind to her prettiness; she was just a warm voice, a person who recognized his existence.

"Someone to talk to?" the lawyer asked.

"Yes. Someone to talk to." They had strolled along Bolivar chatting about the hot weather, drenched in the gusts of band music pouring from *pulquerías* and nightclubs. Once she had put a hand on his arm.

"She took you back to her room?"

"No. We walked . . . and then she said goodbye. . . ."

"Where?"

The old man thought. She had just melted away, leaving a smile for a nightcap, the little dog prancing jauntily after her.

"Near Najera, I think."

"And you never saw her again? You went home and the police woke you a few hours later?"

"Yes" . . . the pounding breaking through his sleep . . . then the two detectives sweating in his room, one of them sucking a hard candy and fingering the wooden cabinet he had just finished making that afternoon. . . .

The lawyer looked at his watch. It was strange, the old man

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mused. Why was he questioning him when he should be home in bed with a warm wife?

"How did they find you so quickly?"

"The girl's friend gave them my description. I am the only European living in that section." He hesitated. "The girl . . . the prostitute? . . . She is dead?"

The lawyer nodded. "They found her in an alley off Bolivar. Someone strangled her, took her night's earnings."

Sad. He could see her bright young face lit with flickering light from the cantinas.

"And you were the last person seen in her company." He rose from the table. "Let's look at your hands."

The old man displayed them. The detectives had asked for the same thing.

"You have several fresh scratches. Why?"

"I had just finished making a cabinet. The file slipped. I told the others that."

The young lawyer seemed satisfied. "I'm sure you're right."

The old man waited, hoping to hear something more affirmative from this polite person who wore such a heavy suit on a hot night. "They think—that I killed her?"

"They do. But they're wrong."

He didn't want to ask the question but it was out before he could restrain it. "Why are you so positive?"

The smile again, a little less solemn this time. "I might look young, but I've been in this business a long time. You're telling the truth, I can tell."

The old man tried to express his thanks, but he only mumbled, his eyes tearing again. He touched the lawyer's sleeve.

"You'd better get some sleep, señor. You've had a long day." Avoiding his eyes, the lawyer tapped the birdcage. "Do you think they ever feed this thing?"

There was a long pause, and then the old man said, "Why?"

When the lawyer answered there was a twist of anger in his words. "Because I'm tired of this country and the way it works. I'm sick of representing rich men in Lincoln Continentals. *Comprende?* Call it a hobby."

The old man nodded. He understood.

At first he couldn't sleep. People crawled over his legs, a man's

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voice pretended to be a guitar. But as dawn brightened the silhouette of bars against the rough wall he was slowly drawn under. . . .

Trumpets blared in the *corrida*. Every eye in the stadium was upon him, burning like the sun. He wheeled in the dirt, frightened, remembering bulls must be brave, but everywhere he turned the matador's cape flashed. It was like being in a tent of *muletas*. Then the sword was poised, poker-hot, and the sound of the crowd surged up with the roar of an ocean. . . .

When he woke, his thin poplin shirt was damp with sweat. Sunlight flooded the cell and the prisoners still sprawled about, huddled and confused.

Later in the morning they were brought tins of refried beans and water. Ravenous, his stomach aching, he devoured the meager portion and tried to remember his friend from the night before. But all he could recall was the gold Omega and the solemn smile.

All through the afternoon, men and women arrived and departed. He sat in a corner of the cell, leaning against his wadded-up coat for a pillow. Perhaps the young man had only been a dream, a good Samaritan materialized by his fear.

As it began to grow dark again the cell door clanged open. "You," said a voice.

It was the policeman from the night before. Maybe his friend had returned; maybe he would be taken to the yellow room.

But he was led instead down another corridor, this one empty of birds, and into a brightly lit administrative section.

The first person he saw was the young lawyer, dressed again in the heavy dark suit. With him were the two detectives who had picked him up. The one who sucked candy said, "Good evening, señor. We are very sorry for your inconvenience."

"Inconvenience?" he mumbled, looking at the young man for guidance.

"You're free. It's all over."

The old man trembled. It was incredible . . . no . . . they were playing a cruel game with him.

"Sign these papers," the lawyer said, handing him some forms. "They'll give you back your wallet and your keys."

Bewildered, he stared at the young man. A dark, wiry beard was beginning to smudge his cheeks and the heavy-lidded eyes were pouched with sleeplessness. "You—you arranged this?"

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"I've been up all night, talking to every whore on Bolivar. It's lucky I'm married."

The two detectives laughed at this. One of them said, "You have a true friend, señor. He found out from the victim's family that she had a lover. He was the one who killed her."

The pen was erratic on the paper; he could hardly sign his own name. "The man told you this?"

"We have a full confession, señor. Thanks to your friend."

They took the forms and returned his possessions. The detective with the candy clapped the young man on the back. "*Magnífico.* Now I will know where to come if I need a good lawyer."

"You might need one sooner than you think—especially if my client decides to sue for false arrest."

The detective spread supplicating hands. "It was a mistake. You know how these things happen."

"Yes. I know." He scowled, motioned to the old man. "Let's get out of this place."

They walked quickly through an archway and down stone stairs into the warm flush of twilight. Still dazed, the old man drank deeply of the clean air.

"I could use some coffee," the lawyer said. "How about you?"

"Fine. But—" He stopped on the pavement. "I am a poor man, señor. But anything I have to repay you . . . anything." He wanted to clasp the man to him, bestow his gratitude like a father on a son.

"Forget it. My pleasure." He indicated a new car parked at the curb.

No, the old man thought. I *will* repay him—I will make a cabinet, a jewel box for his wife. . . .

The air-conditioned car was cool as a cave, and he was grateful for its comfort. But as he climbed in he immediately sensed that something was wrong. Two men sat in the backseat, their eyes studying him. One of them locked the door after he was inside.

The lawyer moved behind the wheel. When he turned to the old man his face was stern, like a judge in court. "Frederick Brenhauser," he intoned quietly, "as a representative of the state of Israel, I arrest you for crimes committed against humanity. . . ."

The car rolled away into clamorous traffic, but he was back in his dream, sentenced by the eyes in the *corrida* as a pair of handcuffs closed over his wrists. . . . ●

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The Bricklayer's Wife

by Donald Olson

From atop the outcropping called Eagle's Perch the woman surveyed the panorama below her, the steep reddish-yellow walls of the gorge, the tin-colored river winding threadlike at its base. It was a long way down. Growing as quickly bored with the vista as with the golf tournament at the inn, from which she'd fled as soon as her lover was no longer in the play, she turned her video camera some distance to the right and below her vantage point to the scenic overlook. There she saw a couple in T-shirts and walking shorts still behaving like teenagers, which they clearly were not. The woman frowned. A dangerous place to cavort. For her own amusement, with no prevision of disaster, she continued to film their antics.

As he was leaving the chapel at the end of the funeral service, a woman Michael Derby had never seen before came up to him and murmured condolences.

"We haven't met," she said, "but I know all about you and your wife. I have something you ought to see. Would it be convenient for me to call on you? Wednesday afternoon, say?"

Immersed in grief, Michael scarcely registered the woman's appearance or her words and only later, alone in the apartment, did he recollect the encounter and what now seemed an extraordinarily odd remark. *I know all about you and your wife.* A curious assertion, he thought, coming from a stranger.

In her tight navy skirt and bolero jacket over a pearl-buttoned white silk blouse, with sleek blond hair framing a pretty face made up to hide its maturing lines, the woman looked in every way as well endowed as the most exclusive finishing school.

"Nice," she said, looking around her. "Your wife do the decorating?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Marian Farris. May we sit down?"

She settled back on the sofa, one hand resting on the expensive handbag beside her.

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"You said you knew my wife?" Michael asked.

"No, I didn't say that at all. Let me explain. Ten days ago I was staying with a friend in one of the Inn-at-the-Peak chalets. He was there for the golf tournament. Golf bores me, so I hiked up to Eagle's Perch with my video camera. From up there I happened to look down to where you and your wife were standing behind that dangerously low iron railing. I turned my camera on you—just for fun. I saw you pick her up in your arms. I saw her struggle to get down. I saw you push her over the railing." She tapped her handbag. "It's all in here, on tape."

Michael listened to this at first with utter disbelief and then with fury. That a perfect stranger should intrude upon his grief with such a vicious fabrication stunned him not only by its audacity but by its cruelly wanton disregard for his bereavement. He could only suppose the woman must be one of those cranks who take perverse delight in badgering the victims of well-publicized tragedies.

He told her exactly what he thought of her, and added: "What you saw—if you saw it at all—was the two of us fooling around up there. I picked Ginnie up, yes, but there was no struggle. It was all in fun. When I let her down her heel caught on a root and she fell backward against the railing. I reached for her. She panicked and fell. There was nothing I could do. It was horrible. How the hell can you say—"

"That you murdered her? I not only say it, I can prove it. I read the whole sad story in the papers. Funny, though, I don't recall your having told anyone you were fooling around when it happened."

She opened her bag and took out a cassette, holding it out to Michael. "I see you have a VCR. Let's take a peek at this, shall we, before you throw me out?"

The last thing Michael wanted, if she was telling the truth about filming the nightmare, was to see it played out again before his eyes. He'd seen it too many times already in his mind. His first thought was to refuse and simply kick her out with threats of calling the police, but something in the woman's brazen air of confidence made him pause. Boorish defiance was probably not the best way to handle her. With a savage gesture he snatched the cassette from her hand, crossed the room, and slipped it into the VCR. The woman herself might be loony but the camera would not lie about what happened up there on that terrible morning.

And yet it did.

As if from an oblique bird's-eye view, Michael saw the two of them, himself and Ginnie, standing at the rail looking out over

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the gorge. He recalled the moment with absolute clarity, and the mood of quiet joy they'd shared upon having found that things were again all right between them, that having avoided the pitfall threatening their marriage they had climbed to a high plateau of safety and reaffirmation. It was in that mood of rediscovered playfulness that he'd swept Ginnie up into his arms and held her over the low railing, laughing at her squeals of mock terror. How wonderful to have found life and loving fun again. And then, a split second later . . .

Now, watching the screen with a profound and terrifying sense of disbelief, Michael was forced to realize how ambiguously his actions there on the lip of the gorge might be interpreted. At that distance, and without the sound of their voices or a clear view of their faces, it did appear that Ginnie was struggling in earnest, and when she stumbled backward it did look as if he were pushing her over the rail, not wildly reaching out to pull her to safety.

For the first time he realized the gravity of his mistake in telling the police he hadn't been within reach of Ginnie when she fell. He'd done so only to avoid a charge of reckless irresponsibility.

"Am I wrong?" asked Marian Farris sweetly. "Would the police still rule your wife's death an accident if they saw that tape? And if I were to tell them I'd passed you on the trail a few minutes earlier and overheard you arguing—violently?"

"That's a damned lie!"

"Your word against mine. And with the tape . . ."

He tried to think rationally, to speak calmly. "It's not true, any of it. Why are you doing this? If you really believe it wasn't an accident, why come to me? Why not go to the police?"

"If I do, you know what it'll mean. You'll be charged with murder."

"And if they ask why you didn't go to them immediately?"

She contrived a look of winsome appeal. "I was frightened. I had a very good reason for not wanting to get involved. You see, I would have had to tell them I was there with my lover and didn't want my husband to find out. But then, like a responsible citizen, I finally decided it was wrong to remain silent."

Michael flung the cassette onto the sofa. "Then do your duty and go to hell for all I care."

One blond eyebrow lifted. "And you'll go to jail. Count on it. And is your life so blamelessly pure? Your marriage was so perfect?"

For a wild shot, as it had to be, this was tellingly accurate. He clearly foresaw what might transpire if the police quizzed him more

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closely than they already had. The recent bad patch in his marriage, the brief separation, would come to light. Having watched that tape, would they for a moment buy his story of having brought Ginnie to the Inn at the Peak to celebrate their reconciliation?

Michael's inner defenses all at once collapsed, even as his manner remained defiant. "What is it you want from me? Look around. I'm not a rich man."

Marian Farris had a warmly provocative laugh. "Don't worry, Michael, I'm not here to pick your pocket. My husband is a rich man. Cards on the table, okay? I want to get rid of Harold. I'm in love with another man and Harold would never give me a divorce. Not, that is, to my profit. I want Harold to die, but not in any phony 'accident.' I want him to disappear, forever. In time to be declared dead. I'm in no hurry."

As if what she was saying stirred a restless excitement in her, Marian Farris rose and wandered about the room as she spoke. "I can't do it myself. Murder is man's work. Besides, I don't want my lover to suspect me of being involved in Harold's disappearance. If the cops want to suspect foul play, fine, let them look to his enemies. He has several. Union grumps, types like that. Now, I've got it all worked out—"

"Shut up!" Michael cried. "Just shut up. I get the picture. You want me to kill your husband rather than risk being charged with my wife's murder. You're crazy. Go hire yourself a proper hit man, don't look at me."

"I need you, Michael. Not just your trigger finger but your muscles. Harold owns a company called the Brickyard. Maybe you've heard of it. Modest name for a big construction company. But that's how he started, with his own little brickyard. Harold loves bricks. Bricks are his hobby as well as his business. God, I sometimes feel as if I live in a brickyard. You'll see what I mean when you come out to Stokely."

"If I go anyplace, it'll be to the police."

"Don't be dumb, Michael. You know that would be a fatal mistake. If you're too squeamish when the moment comes I might even pull the trigger myself. That's the easy part. It's the other thing I need your help with."

"Other thing?"

She smiled teasingly, slipping the cassette into her bag and moving toward the door. "You'll see when you come out to the house. Shall we say tomorrow, about two? We'll have a drink and make final plans."

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Michael didn't move. She smiled fetchingly, as if finding his hostility no more than a childish pose of defiance. "I'm sorry, Michael. There simply isn't anyone else I can turn to. And remember, I've taken precautions, so don't do or say anything you'll regret. Prisons are nasty places."

Tired of pacing the room after she'd gone, Michael sat down at the desk strewn with cards he'd been writing to a few close friends, acknowledging their expressions of sympathy. He opened the phone book and looked up the police department. He lifted the phone, then paused with his finger on the dial. If only he hadn't lied to the police about precisely what had happened up there at the gorge. That lie, coupled with the tape, would surely condemn him in their eyes.

Finally, afraid of acting rashly, he decided to do nothing for the moment. There had to be another way out.

The affluent suburb of Stokely boasted many fine homes but none more impressive than the Farris place, standing alone at the end of a winding road with no close neighbors. That it was a brick house did not surprise Michael, and a most imposing one it was, and now he understood what Marian Farris had meant by saying she felt as if she were living in a brickyard. A low brick wall, newer-looking than the house, bordered the extensive grounds; a brick gazebo stood on a knoll overlooking a pond from which a row of brick plinths supporting pseudo-classical sculptures led to a trellised brick arbor. A wide brick crazy-paved walk led from a small brick gatehouse to the mansion.

Only one of the massive brick gateposts was finished and capped by a granite ball. The other, finished only to waist height, was covered by a canvas tarpaulin, a pile of bricks and bags of cement lying on the ground beside it.

Marian Farris greeted Michael at the door with her welcome-to-the-tea-party smile. In the pale peach and ivory paneled living room she offered him his choice of drinks and mixed the same for herself before taking a chair facing him.

"Isn't this pleasant?" she asked. "So much nicer—more civilized—than yesterday. Let's talk."

"Mrs. Farris, I only came here to appeal to your common sense. Think what you will, I did not murder my wife, and I sure as hell could not murder your husband. What sort of dream world are you living in?"

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She took a sip of her drink, smiled approvingly. "Oh, but I told you, Michael, it's not so much your trigger finger I need as your muscles." Her gaze drifted across his chest and arms. "Lovely muscles, I might add. And strong."

"Strong enough to throttle you with, have you thought of that?"

She laughed at such naivete. "I told you, I've taken precautions. Harming me will not get you off the hook. Now let's talk about bricklaying. Harold's hobby. You must have noticed his work all around here. He started out as a bricklayer and still loves to do it. Claims it relieves his stress and keeps him fit. You noticed the gatepost he's working on? Right now the bottom half looks like a well. That's where I got the idea—about what to do with Harold, I mean. The space within the sides would hold two Harolds. A husky guy like you could finish the job in a couple of hours or so. Child's play, really, and I'll be glad to lend a hand."

Her breezy tone astonished Michael. She might have been discussing preparations for a garden party. Everything about her implied a life of pampered self-indulgence unconnected to reality.

"Harold's going out of town tonight and won't be back until late Saturday. Sunday morning's perfect for the job. If he's shot in bed, cleanup will be easier. Pop him into the gatepost, finish it off, and he'll be gone forever. Left standing at the gate, so to speak."

Before Michael could retort, the phone rang at the far end of the room. Marian Farris went to answer it and returned wearing a look of pleased satisfaction. "My friend," she said. "He's coming round. Finish your drink, darling. I wouldn't want to have to explain you to him. He's madly jealous, but a gorgeous brute."

"Then I suggest you get him to do your dirty work."

"No can do. He's in love with Lady Bountiful, not Lady Macbeth."

Michael's efforts to reason with her were in vain, her well-armored ego impervious to words. Showing him out, she said: "Until Sunday, Michael. Come at seven. Park in the lane below the house and come to the back door. Harold will be sleeping in. And wear old clothes. Bricklaying can be a bit messy."

As if murder weren't.

"I'll think about it," said Michael, knowing there had to be a way to outwit this madwoman.

"There's no time to think, darling. I may be wrong, but I think Harold already suspects I've been two-timing him."

Again Michael thought of going to the police. He nearly convinced himself that if he told them the whole story, explained why he'd

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lied about the circumstances of Ginnie's accident, told them about Marian Farris's scheme to blackmail him into killing her husband, they would be forced ultimately to believe him.

But would they? What proof could he offer? Marian Farris would deny everything if they questioned her. Who could guess what outlandish story she might invent to explain his charges? She might claim he was in love with her, that that was why he'd killed Ginnie and dreamed up the videotape story to spite her when she rejected him. In his present state of mind nothing Marian Farris might do seemed too implausible.

And then he thought about the woman's intended victim. What sort of man was Harold Farris? Might it be safer, even wiser, to approach him? If his wife was correct in thinking Farris suspected her of having an affair, wouldn't he be more inclined to accept the truth? And with Farris on his side, Michael reasoned, he might stand a better chance of getting the police to believe him.

It seemed the lesser of two risks.

Having made up his mind, Michael picked up the phone and dialed the number of Brickyard, Inc., reached Farris's secretary, and told her it was of vital importance that he talk to Farris about a personal matter. He was told that Farris could not be reached before Friday but that Michael's message would be conveyed to him as early as possible.

As if the burden of grief at Ginnie's loss had been reduced to a dull ache while he wrestled with an even more pressing concern, the full weight of it now settled once more upon Michael's heart. The way the accident had appeared to happen as he'd watched the video had sharpened his sense of guilt and irresponsibility. The sheer, stupid recklessness of his behavior filled him with bitter remorse, as painful as if he really had murdered Ginnie and Marian Farris's invasion of his life were no more than the retribution he deserved.

Such dark thoughts tormented him throughout the long hours he spent shut up in the apartment waiting for Farris to contact him. Strangely, it seemed, no one else called, leaving Michael to wonder if even his closest friends wished to distance themselves from him, harboring doubts about the true circumstances of Ginnie's death. Would his life, he wondered, ever return to normal?

Friday passed with no word from Farris; by noon on Saturday Michael could wait no longer and called Farris's office. A maintenance man answered, telling him the offices were closed until Monday morning; there was no one there. Desperate when Farris still hadn't called by late afternoon, Michael rang the Farris house. No

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one answered. He assumed Marian Farris was with her lover. Twice that evening he rang the number. Both times the line was busy.

A heavy mist of rain darkened the early morning sky as Michael parked his car in the lane below the rear of the property and made his way through the trees and across the lawn to the back door. No lights shone in the house. He pressed the bell lightly, his body stiff with tension, rehearsing in his mind what he would do when Marian Farris opened the door, how he would pretend to follow her instructions until he had the gun in his hand. He would then awaken Farris if he was still asleep and tell him the whole story. What happened after that would depend on Farris's response.

He rang again. A light came on behind the door. It opened to frame the figure of a stocky, balding man of pugnacious aspect wearing jeans and a soiled blue pullover.

"You must be Michael," the man said bluntly. "And right on time."

"She was right," said Farris as they drank their coffee at the kitchen table. "I've known for some time she was fooling around. Her and that pretty-boy golfer. Hell, I wasn't born yesterday. That's why I bugged the house and phone to get the goods on her."

"It was true what you heard me tell her," said Michael. "My wife's death was an accident."

Farris shrugged. "Hell, man, I don't give a damn if you did push her off the cliff. Wish I'd had the chance to do that to Marian."

"You said you looked at the video, but it didn't happen that way, I swear it didn't."

Farris uttered a gruntlike sound, either of scepticism or indifference. "Whatever you say. Point is, you did me a favor. If she hadn't blabbed to you in there I'd never have known what she was up to. I'd have ended up—how'd she put it?—'standing at the gate.'"

"I would have warned you," Michael reminded him. "I'd have told you everything if you'd returned my call."

"I had other things on my mind. Like playing back my own tape before dear Marian got home last night. Jesus, you should've seen the bitch's face when she came home and found out I'd rumbled her." His small agate eyes, red-rimmed from lack of sleep, regarded Michael with a wicked gleam of satisfaction. "Played right into my hands, she did. I've wanted to dump her for months but I knew she'd strip me bare and pick my bones if I divorced her."

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Clearly relishing the memory, he told Michael for a second time how he'd thrown her out. "Told her if she packed up and left town last night without a word to her fancy man or anyone else I'd make it worth her while—all she understands is money—but if she didn't I'd have her up on charges of conspiracy to murder. That's all it took. She was out of here. Damn good riddance. I was steamed, man. Took me half the night to work it out of my system. Same way I always do when I'm stressed out. Rolled up my sleeves and went to work on my gatepost down there. Laid the last brick about an hour ago. Then I felt better."

Michael picked up the cassette lying on the table between them. "Well, thanks for this."

"She'd made a copy, you know. For insurance."

"You destroyed it?"

"I will, in time. I need a little insurance myself."

"For what?"

Farris looked at him with a faintly apologetic smile. "Don't take this the wrong way, son, but I've got to be sure you keep your trap shut. In case there's any stink about Marian's disappearance. Not that I think her boyfriend will ask too many questions. Without money she'll be no good to him. Anyway, you're off the hook. Just forget you ever knew Marian—or me."

Michael failed to understand why Farris should make such a point of enjoining him to silence. He would be only too glad to forget the whole affair. "You don't believe me, do you, Farris? You don't believe my wife's death was an accident."

"Hell, what's it matter? If you did kill her, your secret's safe with me."

Michael said bitterly: "I should have gone to the police when she first tried to blackmail me."

"And spoiled all my fun? I'm glad you didn't."

Michael was left with the disturbing impression that in all of this Farris was implying some sort of conspiracy between themselves, something other than merely a conspiracy of silence. He tried not to let it worry him as he got in his car and followed the lane until it joined the main road running past the front of the estate. He slowed almost to a stop as he passed the drive. A floodlight atop the tiny gatehouse shone on the freshly completed gatepost and he thought of Farris laboring through the night to finish the job. Why the rush, Michael wondered, brushing from his mind the last words Farris had uttered to him:

"And she thought I'd be the one left standing at the gate." ●

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ILLUSION

by John F. Dobbyn

It was about as close to ecstasy as this world can conjure. I was third row center in full evening dress, surrounded by the finest satins and furs that Viennese society could display. The Volksopera shimmered in the vibrancy of smiles and applause ignited by every mesmerizing gesture, every misdirecting glance of the prince of illusion.

And for me, it could have been an igloo in Nome. I was oblivious to everything but the hands of Sergei Benetti. In those hands I found Beethoven, DaVinci. I found the flash of divine perfection that God lets us glimpse occasionally in a fellow human.

A professor of law and a published poet, John Dobbyn wrote his first short story only three short years ago. His success in selling his stories to *EQMM* inspired him to try a novel using some of the characters from his Department of First Stories debut piece, and as this issue goes to press we are happy to report that a major literary agent has agreed to represent Mr. Dobbyn's book. Congratulations to a fine new writer!

To the others, it was entertainment. To me, it was the bitter-sweet transportation to a level I knew I could never reach as an illusionist. And in 1982, that mattered more than anything on earth.

I watched three full decks rise in his hands, fan, flutter, reverse, as a single ace responded to his apparently psychic summons to the top. I could feel my emotions rise with it. I was in my own world with those hands.

Something suddenly scuttled across my feet, and I recoiled at the filth of a darting cockroach. The decadent stench of the breath of the drunk on my right projected me ahead ten years. I was suddenly aware of a quiver in those agile hands that put the finesse of that once perfect illusion beyond Benetti's reach. He

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finished with something less than a flourish.

I shoved the drunk off my shoulder. There was a spate of droned applause mixed with calls for the next stripper. It was 1996, and I was back in a bar in the underbelly of New Orleans.

When he held his hands together in front of his forehead in his traditional bow, I could see the white lines of scar tissue running across the backs of his hands. It came back painfully.

I remembered being ecstatic when, in 1986, the Great Benetti first came to play a tour of the finest entertainment halls of the United States. By coincidence, I had come from Italy about the same time, as another kind of illusionist.

I think it was that earlier performance in Vienna that drove my dream of being in Benetti's class as a performer into extinction. To be less was unacceptable. My time as an illusionist was not a total waste, however. Certain skills of the trade became useful in my new profession. I worked for a number of governments on the Continent as an undercover agent until I became too well known to be useful.

Word travels. I was recruited by the American Justice Department to come to Boston as a mole. Mike Cabrese, the U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts, planted a few of us in the North End to take root. I was twenty-five, a poor, hungry kid fresh from Palermo. That was the cover.

I was hanging around a pizza shop on Hanover Street one afternoon when three feds staged a raid. They put the owner and the others against a wall and started going through the place. I knew what they wanted, and I knew where it was. I made a dash like a halfback to the dough drawer. I flipped a lit cigarette lighter into the drawer. The blaze of flash-paper turned the day's betting slips from evidence to char-dust. I was out the back door before the feds could get to me.

The whole thing had been staged, and it worked. Word reached the Don, Carlo Bianchi—as did word of every stirring in the North End—that a new young Sicilian with nerve might fit into the organization.

I started running payoffs to the bookies and receipts to the clearinghouse for peanuts, but the Don had his eye on me. For one thing, we shared a fascination with—and more than that, a former involvement in—the world of illusionists. It was a link that brought us closer. Once in a while, he'd actually send for me to sit at table with him after dinner at Tecchi's Little Italy. I'd tell him about the great sleight-of-hand artists I'd seen in Europe,

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while he'd sit and dream, whittling on his fingernails with a little silver pen-knife from his vest pocket. As a boy, he'd played with illusions. I think he dreamed of those stubby little fingers performing the feats I described.

My control, Mike Cabrese, staged a couple more heroic escapades for me, and within two years, Don Carlo had me on the fringe of the inner circle.

That was about the time I heard about it. I'd been following the Great Benetti's conquest of North America the way the others followed the Celtics. I heard things on the inside. I heard that Bruno Vecchi had gotten him under contract. Vecchi was a one-man plague. He was the worst possible three-way combination—wild, violent, and lucky. I won't say that the Don was above violence, up to and including murder. But it was always business. With Vecchi, it was usually temper and bravado with abandon.

You know what they say. Between good and lucky, it's better to be lucky. Vecchi had made some moves that put him in the number two position in the Boston family, just below the Don. On a whim, he invested in several clubs in Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe. That was how he came to get Sergei Benetti under contract. Once he had him, Vecchi began making demands on Benetti's talent for illusions that involved the movement of narcotics. Benetti balked, and Vecchi had the cords in the backs of his hands sliced.

I wept the day I heard about it.

Another thing they say is that what goes around comes around. Over the years, Vecchi became an embarrassment to the family. His violence was bringing needless headlines of bodies discovered and innocent victims caught in gunfire. He was playing into the hands of the Justice Department, and that was bad for business. In a way, that's what brought me to that rat hole in New Orleans to find the Great Benetti.

Don Carlo finally reached the point of making the decision. Vecchi had to be eliminated. On the other hand, it wasn't that quick or easy. If Vecchi had been a low-ranking soldier, he'd have been a few bubbles on the surface of Boston Harbor before the sun rose. But he was no soldier. He was a made man, an occasional delegate to the commission in New York. His disposal was a matter that had to be cleared with the members of the commission to keep order.

While Don Carlo was tending to the diplomacy involved, he had Vecchi under twenty-four-hour scrutiny. Someone got careless,

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and Vecchi caught on. He went from concern to panic with no intermediate stops. Mike Cabrese got word to me that Vecchi had approached him. He wanted into the federal witness protection program, and he'd testify against his grandmother to get there.

The problem was an interesting one. Vecchi couldn't go to the men's room without two of Don Carlo's men coincidentally answering the same urge. If he had simply tried to bolt, he'd have taken on two pounds of number three shot before he could climb into a car, regardless of diplomatic consequences.

The solution was equally interesting. Don Carlo was coming into his seventieth birthday. There were plans for a birthday celebration that would have suited Mr. Sinatra. A lavish dinner with spectacular entertainment was set for one of the major clubs just outside of Boston.

Because of my background, I was given the minor role of getting an illusionist for the show. I could see a door here—you might say a trapdoor—that seemed to tickle Mike Cabrese. He even had the FBI help me locate Sergei Benetti. When he did, and I went down to that sleaze pit in New Orleans, I had all I could do to hold back the tears.

I watched him on that warped stage, casting pearls of finesse and style before drunks who were there to see strippers, not the illumination of the human spirit. The soaring feats of sleight-of-hand were, needless to say, no longer in the act, but what he did, he did so superbly that I was back in Vienna, and he was wonderful again, and there was not a trace of scar tissue on those hands that God formed to lift the spirits of those with eyes to see them.

My palms were sweating when I knocked on the door of his dressing-closet backstage. He greeted me graciously. I hesitated to embarrass him by mentioning his greater days. But somehow we slipped into it. At first he was misty, but soon he was carrying me through the plush concert halls and salons of Paris with stories that I'll take to my last day.

When I laid out the plan, he listened in silence. He would have a blank check to prepare a performance of illusions—the kind that depend on apparatus rather than manual skill. He'd give one performance—the birthday banquet for Don Carlo. The rest of the act was at his discretion, but the finale would be an illusion of his design where a volunteer from the audience would be made to disappear.

His expression was one of disbelief mixed with perhaps a bit of panic in appearing before a critical audience again. When I men-

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tioned that the volunteer who would disappear was Bruno Vecchi, his eyes closed, and I couldn't read his expression. When they opened, he simply agreed.

There was a full-scale rehearsal the afternoon of the extravaganza. Benetti presented an act that could have opened at Caesar's Palace that evening. When it was time to rehearse the finale, he called on me to play the volunteer from the audience. A glass cube, five feet by five feet by five feet, was wheeled to center stage. The floor markings centered it over a carefully concealed trapdoor in the stage floor. Don Carlo's people didn't know it, but the door led to a passageway to an outer door behind the stage. I had arranged with Mike Cabrese to have his men at that door the night of the show with a van to scoot away the exiting Vecchi.

Benetti led me into the glass case and told me what to expect. Inside, I could hear his dramatic patter that built to a climax as he dropped a curtain that covered all sides of the case. In a flash, the floor dropped out from under me. I found myself on my knees under the stage. I worked my way through to the back door and came back in by the side stage entrance. When I got back, the curtain around the case was up, and the case was filled with two hundred pounds of snarling tiger.

The night of the show, I was nervous as a cat, no pun intended. The glitter and gowns that filled the hall brought back the old days. The only difference was that I recognized most of the male guests. The thought occurred to me that if that hall could have been turned into a jail, the spine of the Cosa Nostra would have been broken.

I had a seat one table removed from the Don, who was in controlled glory. Next to him sat his wife, and beyond her, Bruno Vecchi.

I understand the dinner was a Roman banquet. I ate, but I don't remember tasting a thing. The dessert was some spectacular flaming thing, and then the lights dimmed. The show began. There was a comic, a juggler, a singer—all paying lavish honor and tribute to the Don.

Then the *pièce de résistance.* The hall went black. A burst of purple smoke picked up a sudden spotlight, and the great Sergei Benetti was in the center of it. The Don was delighted. In fact, every nuance of every flourish that went into illusion after illusion

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seemed to broaden his grin. At one point he gave me a clasped-hands sign as one aficionado to another.

Then it was time. I was choking on my heart when the lights went down to one spotlight, as Benetti set the drama for the finale. He called for a volunteer. Spotlights roamed around the room. As prearranged, Bruno Vecchi stood up. I could see that the Don was surprised.

Applause broke out, and Vecchi grinned and bowed. He strutted to the stage. His head was in the applause until he reached center stage and came face-to-face with Benetti. I wasn't sure he remembered what he had ordered done to him nearly ten years ago. The years in between had been strewn with the victims of his temper. Maybe he read something in Benetti's face. Anyway, the smile froze on his lips.

Benetti whispered something to him that I couldn't catch. Whatever it was, it got him to enter the glass case. The entire front of the case was open. Benetti held out his hand to invite the guest of honor, Don Carlo, to come to the stage. He required no coaxing.

Benetti invited Don Carlo to inspect the case, which he did from top to bottom, with a grin that flowed from a child's delight at sharing the stage with one of the world's great illusionists.

Benetti led the Don back to the edge of the stage, and the spotlight and obsequious applause followed him back to his table.

Then it was time. Benetti carefully sealed the glass case shut, with Vecchi inside like a penned goat. The house lights came down. The case was bathed in yellow and red spotlights.

Benetti said a few words that brought a hush that was broken only by Vecchi's heavy breathing. Benetti threw the switch that released the curtain that came down over the four sides of the case.

I listened for the click of the trapdoor, but I never heard it. The silence was torn by primal, guttural roars and screams that shook the case.

Benetti looked frozen in shock. Stagehands ran to rip back the curtain. The tiger that nearly filled the case was tearing the flesh of the screaming, struggling Vecchi.

One of Don Carlo's bodyguards sprang up to the stage and fired enough nine-millimeter shells into the cage to kill the tiger. Stagehands forced open the front of the cage and pulled out the remains of the nearly dismembered Vecchi.

I was aware of the feds running in from the backstage door where they were waiting for Vecchi to make his escape. Mike

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Cabrese was with them. He saw Vecchi dead on the floor and threw me a look that said my bright idea had cost him the witness of a lifetime.

Sergei Benetti was still standing frozen at the side of the stage. Cabrese gave orders to put him in cuffs and read him his rights. I don't think Benetti even knew what was happening to him.

All the action was around Vecchi's body and Benetti. I moved up to the glass case that had been sprung open. There was blood everywhere.

I felt with my hand in the bottom corner where the release was hidden that should have dropped half of the floor out from under Vecchi, while the other half of the floor sprang up to release the tiger into the case. The release was submerged in blood. My hand dripped crimson when I removed it.

I was nearly at the point of becoming ill when I ran to the washroom to clean the blood off my hands. The more I scrubbed, the more I realized that what was staining the water was not Vecchi's blood. It was mine.

I wrapped a paper towel as tightly as I could around the razor slice that had opened the pad of my index finger, and ran back to the stage. Two feds were taking Benetti out the back door. Cabrese was yelling orders when I grabbed him and pulled him behind the curtain offstage. I still had to be careful about being seen talking to feds.

"It wasn't Benetti, Mike. You've got the wrong guy."

He wasn't taking any of it. Cabrese held out his hand in a fist.

"That's where I had Carlo Bianchi's neck until you put my witness in the hands of some magician who wants revenge."

I grabbed his lapel and pulled his ear next to my mouth. I prayed that he'd do what I said while there was still time. Maybe it was the drama I forced into my voice. Whatever it was, he moved fast.

He grabbed a tablecloth from one of the tables. He shoved aside the Don's soldiers who were milling around the glass case. With the tablecloth, he wiped the blood away from the release at the bottom of the case.

I stayed backstage, but I could hear him call to a stagehand to bring a tool kit. I saw him take a pair of needlenose pliers and bend over into the glass case. When he straightened up, he looked back at me. He held up the pliers that still gripped the tiny razor-sharp triangle of steel that he had pulled out of the

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release. I nodded and pointed in the direction of Don Carlo.

Mike remembered what I had told him. He took no small delight in dispatching two feds to take the Don by the arms while Mike reached into the Don's vest pocket. He pulled out the silver penknife the Don used to pare his fingernails.

I strained around the curtain to see him open the penknife. My heart came down out of my throat when I saw that the last quarter-inch of the blade had been broken off. That quarter-inch of steel meant that Benetti was innocent.

Mike read the Don his Miranda rights and had him taken away by the feds. Then he came backstage to show me the blade.

"There's your conviction, Mike. You don't need Vecchi as a witness. You can get Don Carlo on murder one for killing Vecchi."

"How did you know?"

I looked at the blade with the tip missing.

"It turned into a perfect setup for Don Carlo. When Benetti let him examine the glass case, he knew how the release worked. Those illusions are all about the same. The Don's had experience with them before. I think he saw the chance to finesse the politics with the commission and get Vecchi out of the way in one move. All he had to do was jam the release. Everyone was bound to suspect Benetti. This crowd all knew Benetti had the motive. Who knows, it might even have passed as an accident."

Cabrese held up the tip of the knife in the pliers.

"How'd you know he jammed it with a knife blade?"

I held up my finger wrapped in crimson paper towel. "I've watched him play with that knife for the past ten years. It just all came together."

My usefulness in Boston came to an end that night. There were too many who could have seen me in cozy conversation with the U.S. Attorney. I was relocated to San Francisco. It meant starting at the bottom, but it's a living.

What did bring me pleasure over the years was the effect that night in Boston had on Sergei Benetti's career. They say that with actors and politicians there's no such thing as *bad* publicity. When the dust settles, it's all name recognition. Benetti became known as that famous illusionist involved with the Boston mob. He had bookings at the clubs of his choice from New York to the West Coast.

And every time he comes to San Francisco, I'm back in the third row of the Volksopera in Vienna. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

SIC TRANSIT GLORIA

by Barbara Paul

"*Sic transit gloria mundi,*" Roberts read from the paper. "On Monday, Gloria threw up in the subway."

"Ha ha," said Gloria Sanchez, not looking up from the typewriter.

"You don't think that's funny?"

"It's Friday afternoon, Roberts. *Nothing* is funny." They'd flipped a coin to decide who'd write the report on the arson in the project houses; Gloria lost.

No one else was in the police detective unit room on the second floor of the ninth precinct stationhouse. The other detectives all managed to be out on cases as the work week drew to a close; that phone call coming in ten minutes before the shift change could wreck your weekend. But this time Gloria and her partner had misjudged; they'd wound up their investigation into the projects fires about an hour too early. The place had been an oven even

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after the flames were extinguished; the city's charitable impulse had not extended to air-conditioning the falling-down project houses. Roberts had been antsy to get out of that depressing place, but no more so than Gloria herself. She'd once lived there.

"DiFalco in?" she asked.

Roberts craned his neck to look through the glass partition of the captain's office. "Yep."

She'd finish the report but not turn it in until Monday. If DiFalco saw her leaving a report on the lieutenant's desk, he'd keep them there, quizzing them about meaningless details until well after their shift had ended; it was one of the Captain's little ways of reminding them who was boss. The Great White Father needed lots of props.

Says Barbara Paul: "For some years I've been writing a series of books featuring NYPD detective Marian Larch. Marian has been gradually building up a family of friends and associates who each play a different role in her life. My goal is to write one short story for each of these supporting characters, to give them a chance to tell their own stories independently of Marian. 'Sic Transit Gloria' is the second of these stories." †

The phone rang; they both groaned. "I'm typing," Gloria pointed out.

Her partner took the call. "Detective Roberts."

Gloria concentrated on finishing the report, only half listening as Roberts asked a question or two, jotting down the answers. When he'd hung up, he cleared his throat, something he did only when he was nervous. *Uh-oh.*

"They just fished a burlap bag out of the East River," he said in a tight voice. "Three kids inside. All dead."

Gloria's hand reaching for the finished report froze in midair. "Jesus Christ!" The two partners stared at each other. "Dead before they were tossed in?" *She hoped.*

"Don't know yet." He cleared his throat again. "Lieutenant's not here."

"Yeah." She rolled the report out of the typewriter and signed it hastily, dropping it off in the lieutenant's office on their way to see DiFalco.

The captain had watched their approach, sitting in one of his

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power poses—bent forward, weight supported by two fists pressing down on the surface of his desk. "Was that the project-fires report?" he asked. "What did you—"

"No fatalities," Gloria interrupted. "Bomb and Arson is taking it. Listen to Roberts, Captain."

"Call just came in," her partner reported. "Three dead kids were just pulled out of the river. They'd been stuffed into a burlap bag."

Gloria watched as DiFalco's expression turned to one of disgust. Not shock . . . disgust. He stood up abruptly, making the legs of the chair squeal against the floor. "Fill me in on the way." He charged past them out the door.

Gloria stopped at her desk long enough to call Gran Fran and tell her she'd be late getting home. Then she had to run to catch up with the two men.

The late afternoon heat was oppressive to the point of making breathing difficult. "Sanchez, you drive," DiFalco instructed. "Okay, Roberts, what have they got?"

Gloria started the car and sped out of the parking lot across the street from the ninth precinct stationhouse. Anyone watching would think the two white men in the backseat had a black female chauffeur. Chauffeuse? She didn't mind driving, but damned if she'd let anyone call her a chaufferette.

Roberts was consulting his notebook. "A fry cook named Wiechowski was smoking a joint in East River Park and watching this homeless pair . . . they had some kind of hook on a pole and they were snagging things out of the river. They pulled in this big burlap bag—but after they opened it, they both took off running. Wiechowski went down to take a look. He saw the dead kids, called the cops. That's all so far."

DiFalco grunted. "Crime Scene Unit?"

"Called from the site."

Roberts read out directions to the exact location. As Gloria pulled the car onto a grassy place not meant for parking, they could see the CSU was already there. The usual crowd of onlookers was abnormally quiet. Violent death always brought the voyeurs out of the woodwork; but even they were subdued when the victims were children.

Small children, Gloria saw with a further shock. When Roberts had said kids, she'd visualized teenagers, or near-teens. But these three, two boys and a girl, were much younger than that; one of the boys looked like a preschooler. White kids. Looked well-nourished. She couldn't tell much about the quality of their clothing;

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too much river dirt. The small bodies, bloated now, had been removed from the burlap bag and were laid out in a row.

Captain DiFalco went off to talk to the first officer on the scene while Roberts was interviewing the fry cook who'd called the police. The man kneeling by the girl's body was from the medical examiner's office, an Asian Gloria knew slightly. She hunkered down next to him. "Dr. Wu."

He glanced up. "Hello, Sanchez." He shook his head. "Isn't this about the ugliest thing you've ever seen?"

Just about. "Tell me they were dead when they went into the water."

Another headshake. "I wish I could. But there are no wounds on the bodies. A few superficial scratches they probably inflicted on each other while they were struggling to get out of the bag. The autopsy will show whether there's river water in the lungs or not—that's all we'll have to go on."

"That's enough. How long they been dead?"

"They'd been in the water long enough for the decomposition gases to make them float. But not long enough for the fingernails to loosen. Hot weather speeds everything up, so my guess is from three days to a max of three weeks. And before you ask—no, the autopsy won't pin it down any more than that."

Gloria nodded. "Call me when you've finished the autopsy?"

Dr. Wu stood up tiredly and peeled off his latex gloves. "Remind me . . . where am I?"

"Ninth precinct."

"Right. I'll call."

Gloria left to find Roberts and Captain DiFalco. Neither the first officer nor the fry cook had had anything to add; the latter had never gotten a good look at the faces of the two homeless he'd been watching. "Don't waste time looking for them," DiFalco instructed. "They don't know anything. Sanchez, you're the primary on this one. Start with Missing Persons."

"We'll need pictures," she said. "Cleaned-up ones." They couldn't go to parents of missing children and show photos of the dead kids the way they were now.

"Tell the CSU you want morgue shots. And you two can forget about your weekends—I want you on it until you catch the bastard who did this. Now, I've got to go make sure our PR flack gets his facts straight."

Like spelling your name right. Gloria told the photographer they'd need morgue shots by early tomorrow morning and trailed

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after DiFalco back to the car. She and Roberts would spend the evening going through Missing Persons reports, looking for possible matches.

Gloria dropped the Great White Father off at the stationhouse on East Fifth and headed the car downtown toward Police Plaza and Missing Persons.

Gran Fran was waiting up for her when she got home a little before eleven. "You work too hard, chile," the old woman said.

"Yeah, I keep telling 'em that," Gloria replied, "but they just don't listen."

"You hungry?"

"Naw, I ate. What you doing up so late?"

"I got somethin' on my mind, Gloria."

At that moment Gloria wanted a shower more than anything in the world, but she sat down to listen to what her grandmother had to say. "What's troubling you, Gran?"

The old woman leaned forward in her chair. "I don't wanna go into that home you took me to see. I go in there, I'll die. An' those people in there, they all yell at you all the time. I ain't deaf. And I ain't gonna end up just one more old black woman sittin' around waitin' to pass on. I just cain't do it, chile. Don't make me."

Gloria's heart sank. "You know you need somebody with you all the time. I worry about you here alone all day."

The old woman lifted her chin. "I ain't gonna go die just to save you the trouble of worryin'," Gran Fran snapped. "And I know I cain't take care of myself no more, you don't have to tell me that." Her tone softened. "But they's another way. I want to go back to Alabama. I want to go home."

"Alabama!"

"You remember Estelle, Sister Charlayne's chile?"

Gran Fran had a lot of relatives in the South that Gloria had never met, but Estelle had come to New York for a visit about five years ago. "Sure, I remember."

"I done called her and ast, and she say if I turn my Social Security check over to her, she'll take me in."

Gloria didn't care for the sound of that. "Why you wanna go back? You never lived in Alabama long as I know you, Gran. And you don't visit, haven't for years."

"But it's where I was born, an' thass where I wanna be when my time comes." The old woman reached out and took Gloria's hand.

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"Gloria, honey, you been real good to me for a lot of years, and I loves you for it. But it's time for me to go home. Let go, chile."

Stall. "Lemme call Estelle tomorrow. Then we talk about it. Okay?"

A big smile split Gran Fran's wrinkled face. "Okay. Then we talk about it."

To change the subject, Gloria got up and turned on the television. "I got a new case today," she said. "Let's see if it made the news."

It did. Eventually Captain DiFalco's serious face filled the screen, revealing the fate of the three as yet unidentified children. He announced pompously that he promised the city of New York that whoever perpetuated such a monstrous act would be brought to justice. No mention of the name of the detective who would be leading the investigation. As usual.

"That man sho' do love hisself," Gran Fran commented. "Those poor littl'uns! Who'd do such a thing to chirrun?"

"Some sick sonuvabitch," Gloria said, wishing now she hadn't let her grandmother watch. She helped the old woman get ready for bed, making sure she took her medication; Gran Fran sometimes forgot.

After finally getting her shower, Gloria crawled into bed and tried to shut out the sound of the rock music pounding away in the apartment below. Over the sound of the music she could make out angry shouting from the outside hallway; but she'd double-checked all six locks on the steel door before she went to bed. The building was only one step up from a tenement, but it was all she could find within walking distance of the stationhouse on East Fifth. Gloria frequently used her lunch break to run home and check on the old woman. It was why she'd never asked to transfer out of the Ninth, one of the worst precincts in the city. The Ninth was an area of town where she could afford an apartment with two bedrooms.

Her grandmother had had several bad falls. She couldn't use her walker in the crowded apartment, and her cane wasn't always enough to keep her balanced and upright. She needed to make frequent trips to the bathroom, each one a hazardous journey for her, alone. And that was the old woman's life these days: making it safely to the bathroom and back again.

Gloria remembered when she was still in the police academy how Gran Fran always had friends dropping by, or she herself was off to see somebody or other. But most of those friends were

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dead now, or in the same condition Gran Fran was in; visiting days were over for all of them. Now her grandmother never left the apartment, sitting there alone in fear and pain all day, just waiting for Gloria to get home. That was no kind of life. Gloria had thought Gran would welcome the idea of a nursing home—someone to help her when she needed it, people to talk to again.

And Gloria could visit. But if she took her grandmother to Alabama, she might never see her again. Gran Fran didn't have much time left, and that ailing old black woman was the only person in the world Gloria could call family.

Gloria was the product of a mixed marriage. Her father was a Puerto Rican named Carlos Sanchez who'd run out on her mother when she became pregnant, so Gloria had never known him. Her black mother, LuAnn, had been sixteen years old when Gloria was born; she stuck around four more years before she too took off for parts unknown, leaving her young daughter with Gran Fran. The two had been on welfare and living in the project houses off and on all through Gloria's childhood; Gran did domestic work when she could get it.

Gloria's only memory of her mother was of a pretty young woman crying her heart out. Gloria had once asked Gran if LuAnn and Carlos had really been married. "LuAnn say they were," was the old woman's reply.

Gloria had soon learned that a half-black, half-Hispanic child was not welcome in either community. But she did not suffer a lonely childhood; the aggressiveness that the Lower East Side breeds into all its children let her make it clear to the other kids that they ignored Gloria Sanchez at their peril. She even bullied her way into the home of a Latina schoolmate and there, slowly and laboriously, learned to speak Spanish.

Gloria was tolerated, but she was never really accepted. Only her black grandmother had not held her mixed heritage against her; Gran Fran had even been proud of Gloria's lighter skin—an attitude that at one time had irked her granddaughter, on days she felt more black than Hispanic. But as she grew into adulthood, Gloria learned she could put on the persona of either culture with equal ease. And that was something she'd put to use many a time, ever since deciding her best chance for survival was to put on a badge and carry a gun.

She'd been black the last three days. Tomorrow, she'd be Rosie Perez.

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Dr. Wu had called early. River water in the lungs; the kids had been tossed in alive. The CSU had provided them with the requested morgue shots and the added information that the three children had been wearing good-quality clothing. No welfare family getting rid of unwanted mouths to feed, then. They'd have to depend on the Missing Persons reports for their leads.

"Forty-two names," Gloria said. "I guess we'd better divide these up." They got busy calling the names on their separate lists, making sure the various parents would be at home before paying their grim visits.

It was a pain-filled morning. The families had had their anxieties aroused by the phone calls; their guilty relief that the drowned children were not theirs was heartbreaking to see. One divorced mother asked if the children had been sexually abused. Gloria told her the medical examiner had said no.

By noon, Gloria was on the Upper West Side, too far away to check on Gran Fran in person. A phone call assured her the old woman had had a good morning watching cartoons. Then Gloria spread out a pile of change, pulled out her address book, and called Gran's niece Estelle in Canoe, Alabama.

After the necessary amenities, Gloria asked if Estelle had really agreed to give Gran Fran a home.

Yes, indeed she had. "I allus liked Fran," Estelle said. "My kids is gone, Gloria, moved to Mobile or N'Yawlins, most of 'em. Kids don't like being stuck in a place like Canoe no more. But it's a good slow place for old folks like your Gran."

Cautiously, Gloria brought up the matter of Gran's signing her Social Security check over to Estelle. "Wouldn't it be better to charge her a flat fee for room and board?"

"Oh Law', Gloria honey, your Gran never did eat much. And I got the room now that the kids is gone. No, what I'm worryin' about is all those pills old folks has to take. They costs a lot of money. And what if she needs an operation? I can give her good meals and a place to stay, but I cain't pay for no operation."

Gloria started to say she'd pay for the medical expenses, but paused; Estelle couldn't be calling her for money every time Gran needed a prescription filled. "Yeah, that makes sense," she agreed.

"I tell you what you can do," Estelle went on. "Send her a li'l spendin' money ever' month. Ever'body feel better with cash in their pocket. You bring your Gran on down here. She can have the boys' room now they gone."

Estelle's "boys" were close to forty; Estelle herself must be

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pushing sixty. "Estelle, you understand what you're taking on? Gran Fran is feeble and has to be watched. She needs help just going to the bathroom."

A throaty laugh filled the receiver. "Tell me about it. I already got one just like that livin' here—my daddy's in the same way. Him and Fran'll be company for each other." Another laugh. "Hey, Gloria? They might fall in love and get married."

Gloria had to smile at that. She told Estelle she'd call her back in a day or two and hung up. Gran Fran was lucky. She had two places where she was welcome; she wasn't one of those debilitated old people who were just a burden no one wanted. And Estelle's place sounded right for Gran, away from the noise and dirt and constant fear the city generated. She'd have someone of her own generation to talk to, someone she already knew. Clearly, taking Gran to Alabama would be the best thing for her.

But I can't do it, Gloria thought in sudden anguish. *I just can't give up the only person in the world I have to love.*

At that moment her pager went off. When she called in, she learned that Roberts had found the parents of the two boys who'd been in the burlap bag.

"Darren and Jamie Bellamy," Roberts told her, back at the station-house. "Aged nine and six. Mrs. Bellamy knew the name of the girl, too . . . Kyra Waterman. She's not on my list."

Gloria quickly scanned her own list of missing children. "Not here, either." The two exchanged a puzzled glance. "Her family didn't report her missing?"

"Lemme check." Roberts phoned Missing Persons; they had no report on a Kyra Waterman.

"Fill me in," Gloria ordered.

The boys had been missing for two weeks, Roberts said. "Darren Bellamy and Kyra Waterman were buds. Jamie Bellamy was the tagalong younger brother. The last the Bellamys saw of their boys was on a Monday when Mrs. Bellamy dropped them off at the Claymore School on East Eightieth."

Gloria raised an eyebrow. "Upscale-uppity."

"Yeah, the Bellamys have money. But when the housekeeper went to pick them up in the afternoon, a school official said that the boys and Kyra had left with Kyra's mother, Mrs. Waterman."

"They call the Watermans?"

"Mrs. Waterman says she let the boys out in front of their

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building. Mrs. Bellamy blames Mrs. Waterman for not watching to see they got inside safely."

Gloria shook her head, making her gold-loop earrings dance. "Doesn't make sense, man," she said, her soft Latin lilt making the words sound like a song. "If the two boys disappear' then, and Kyra disappear' later—how come they all end up in that same burlap bag?"

"Yeah. And why didn't the Watermans report Kyra missing?"

"Let's go ask. They both work?"

"Just him."

"We talk to the lady firs'. Where they live?"

The Watermans had a townhouse on East Eighty-fifth. The door was answered by a uniformed Jamaican maid; Gloria flashed her detective's shield and asked in Spanish to see Mrs. Waterman.

The minute or so before the lady of the house joined them was enough to tell the two detectives the place reeked of money. They looked in as many rooms as they could in the time they had, and everything they saw looked brand new. Pricey modern furniture, original contemporary art on the walls. No antiques, no identifiable family heirlooms. The place was a showroom for success symbols.

Janine Waterman was an attractive, well-cared-for woman in her early to mid thirties who had a polished persona for dealing with strangers. "Is it my husband you want to see?" she asked. "I'm afraid he had to go into his office this afternoon."

"We'll talk to you, ma'am," Gloria said. "Does Mr. Waterman often work on Saturdays?"

"Almost never." She graciously offered them seats and then sat quietly, her head tilted to one side, waiting to hear what they had to say. Posing for them. The two detectives automatically catalogued details: five feet five inches, a hundred and twenty pounds, short black hair expensively styled, luminous hazel eyes that not only made eye contact but held it. Her at-home Saturday afternoon clothes were a stylish two-piece dress and mid-heels.

Gloria looked at the woman's hands; they lay perfectly still in her lap. But Mrs. Waterman was affecting a composure that Gloria sensed was not real. Something was bothering the woman.

Gloria leaned back in a chair that would have cost her six months' rent and let Roberts explain that the two Bellamy boys had been found drowned; he made no mention of young Kyra Waterman.

Kyra's mother expressed shock, then grief, then self-recrimina-

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tion. "I feel responsible," she said with a catch in her voice. "I didn't wait until they were safely inside. Oh, those poor boys! Do you have any idea who did it?"

"Not yet," said Roberts. "We just got an ID on them an hour ago."

"Those poor boys," she repeated.

"Where's Kyra?" Gloria asked abruptly.

The question didn't *quite* take Janine Waterman by surprise. "Why, she's staying with my sister for a while, in upstate New York."

Gloria pulled out her notebook. "What's your sister's phone number?" She made a point of pronouncing it *seestuh*.

The woman paled. "Really, Detective, er . . ."

"Sanchez."

"Detective Sanchez, what's this all about? Why should I give you my sister's phone number?"

"So I can check an' make sure Kyra's really there."

"Well, I just told you she was there! Really, Detective, this is too much."

Gloria leaned forward and said in a soft, accent-free voice: "We both know she's not there, Mrs. Waterman. Kyra was kidnapped too, wasn't she?"

The other woman's eyes grew large. "Kidnapped! I don't know what you're talking about. Kyra's with my sister."

Gloria and Roberts exchanged a glance. Then, as gently as she could, Gloria told Janine Waterman that her daughter had been found dead with the Bellamy boys.

At first she was so still that Gloria was beginning to wonder if she'd understood. Then Mrs. Waterman stood up and walked stiffly out of the room.

Gloria turned to Roberts. "Did the Bellamys tell you where the husband works?"

"Yeah, he's CEO of some firm on Madison, part of a conglomerate." He pulled out his notebook and flipped a page. "Bracewell Communications."

She pointed to a phone. "Get him here."

Gloria spent the next ten minutes outside the door of the room Mrs. Waterman had retreated to, listening to the choking, whimpering sounds coming from inside. Finally the door opened and Mrs. Waterman stared at her blankly. "I tried to call Harris at his office. He wasn't there."

"My partner called him. He's on his way home." Gloria led her

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back to the living room, asked if she could get her anything, received a headshake in reply.

Roberts gestured Gloria out to the hallway. "I had to tell him. He wouldn't come without knowing why."

She nodded. "Prolly just as well." Department policy was to break the news of the death of a loved one in person whenever possible. "How long a drive from his office?"

"Another five minutes."

It was closer to ten when Harris Waterman came bursting in. He ignored the two detectives and went straight to his wife. They clung to each other silently for a moment, and then murmured a few things Gloria couldn't catch. Waterman was a handsome man, not yet forty, bulky in the chest and shoulders. Brown hair and eyes, gold wire glasses, enormous hands. He was as expensively garbed as his wife.

Finally Waterman acknowledged their presence. "You're sure it's Kyra?"

Silently Roberts took out the morgue shot of the girl and said, "Brace yourselves," before handing it to the Watermans.

Mrs. Waterman dropped her face into her hands and began to cry. Clenching his jaw, Mr. Waterman thrust the photo back at Roberts. "Yes," he said. "That's Kyra."

"I know you want us out of here," Gloria said to them, "an' I don' blame you. But if we're gonna catch this guy, we gotta have some answers. Okay?"

The couple looked repelled, but both nodded agreement.

"Awright . . . first, did you get a ransom call?"

They did, Harris Waterman said. The kidnapper had wanted an even million. It had taken Waterman a few days to convert some stock, but he'd got the million; it filled two large suitcases. He was told to take the money to an abandoned gas station on Staten Island; the kidnapper said the public phone there still worked. Waterman was to wait by the phone for further instructions.

"I waited two hours," the man said. "Nothing. I tried the phone and got a dial tone, so it wasn't that. I finally gave up and came home." They'd had no further word from the kidnapper.

"Why didn't you call the police?"

"Because he said he'd cut Kyra's throat if we did!" Mrs. Waterman answered faintly.

"We couldn't take the chance," Waterman added. "The police would be in on it, the FBI would be in on it . . . We didn't want to scare him into doing something rash."

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"The Bellamys called the police."

Mrs. Waterman put a hand to her forehead. "Oh, that was just a . . . a fluke. The Bellamys learned the boys were missing right away, when their housekeeper got back from the school. Before we knew Kyra was gone. The Bellamys called the police before the kidnapper had a chance to call *them*. They didn't tell him they'd already reported the boys missing."

"And when did you find Kyra was missing?"

Mrs. Waterman hesitated; her husband murmured, "Tell them."

She took a deep breath. "I didn't drop off just the boys at the Bellamys' place—I left all three of them there, Kyra too. The kids often played in one another's houses. The first hint I had that something might have happened to Kyra came when Rose Bellamy called wanting to know where her boys were. But I thought nothing of it then—I just assumed the kids had slipped out of the house without Rose's seeing them."

"So how did you find out?"

"It wasn't until the kidnapper called that we actually knew he had Kyra." She established eye contact, first with Roberts and then with Gloria. "I apologize for telling you that story about Kyra's visiting my sister. Harris and I thought Kyra would have a better chance of surviving if we just went on as if nothing had happened. But her absence had to be explained somehow."

"That's what you told the school? That she was out of town?"

She nodded. "Oh, it's my fault! I should have stayed until they were inside!" But even while blaming herself, Mrs. Waterman was looking for exoneration. "I've done it dozens of times, dropping them off like that! It's never been a problem. It was broad daylight, a good neighborhood. Nobody else was around. And I still don't see how the kidnapper could have grabbed them in so short a time . . . unless he was hiding there waiting."

"Or mebbe the kids didn't go straight into the buildin'. Coulda gone someplace in the neighborhood firs'—that's somethin' we can check. You got a recent picture of Kyra?"

Mrs. Waterman left the room and returned with a five-by-seven of a chubby little girl with a sad face. "It's not very flattering, I'm afraid. But it's the most recent we have."

When asked, the Watermans described the kidnapper's voice as harsh and low-pitched . . . almost as if he were hoarse. Neither of them recognized the voice.

The detectives told the Watermans they'd keep in touch and left.

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Roberts said, "We're gonna need help on this one."

Gloria agreed. "I'll ask DiFalco for some men to canvass the neighborhood where the Bellamys live. Where *do* they live?"

Roberts pointed. "One short block down, three long blocks across. Same neighborhood."

"Let's pay 'em a visit."

On the way, Gloria said, "If you learned that some children were missing—children you'd just left your own child with—would you think 'nothing of it' at first?"

"Yeah, that's kind of odd. Maybe it just didn't sink in on her that Kyra might be in danger."

"Huh. Me, I'd be yellin' and screamin' *Where's my kid?*" Gloria said. "But then, me and Janine Waterman ain't exactly two of a kind."

"Not exactly," Roberts agreed.

Gloria shot him a look.

No one was home at the Bellamy house. Not even a maid, Jamaican or otherwise, to answer the door. "Back to the stationhouse?" Roberts asked. "Can we stop somewhere on the way? I didn't get any lunch."

Neither did Gloria. They stopped for greaseburgers and coffee in a cafe where Gloria tried to lighten her mood by flirting with the Puerto Rican behind the counter.

Roberts, who spoke no Spanish, said, "I hate when you talk dirty." He finished a burger and cleared his throat. "I've made up my mind. I'm gonna take the Sergeants Exam in September."

Gloria nodded slowly. "Good move, dude."

"It's the only way I'm ever gonna get out of the ninth precinct." He cleared his throat. "Sanchez, I don't get it. You could ace that exam, but you've never taken it. You got something against being a sergeant? You *like* it in the Ninth?"

"I got my reasons," she replied automatically. Then it hit her: If Gran Fran went to live with Estelle, Gloria would have no need to stay in the ninth precinct any longer. The thought made her dizzy . . . mostly with guilt. "You finished? Let's go."

Back at the stationhouse, they found a message from Captain DiFalco demanding a progress report. Gloria was surprised to be able to reach him at home; DiFalco liked to spend his weekends playing.

When she told him they had a kidnapping-for-ransom on their hands, he grunted. "That's what I was afraid of. Nail this one fast, Sanchez. I don't want the FBI horning in. What do you need?"

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"Manpower. We oughta show photos of the kids 'round the neighborhood. In case they didn't go straight into the Bellamys' buildin'."

"That was two weeks ago. Not much chance of anybody remembering. But yeah, check it out. Who's there?"

Gloria looked around the PDU squadroom. "Faulkner, Goetz, and Minutello."

"Put Goetz on."

She called the detective to the phone. Goetz bitched about being pulled off his own case, but it was protest for form's sake. He handed the phone back to Gloria and went to tell Faulkner and Minutello they were to drop everything to do a door-to-door.

"What's your next move?" DiFalco wanted to know.

"We haven't seen the Bellamys since we learned this was a kidnappin'. They're next."

"Right. I'll be in later. Sanchez, you and Roberts can take time off to sleep, but nothing else. You hear?"

"I got it, I got it."

She briefed the other three detectives and handed over the photos of the kids. Then Roberts made a phone call. The Bellamys were home.

Jack and Rose Bellamy could have passed as brother and sister. Same dark coloring, same small, wiry build, same rapid way of talking. Their home, unlike the Watermans', looked as if children had lived there; comfort was more important to the Bellamys than maintaining a showplace. Nor were they as self-consciously fashionable as the Watermans; both wore sneakers and sweats.

A picture of the two boys was prominently displayed in the living room. They'd been good-looking kids, more attractive than the rather dumpy Kyra Waterman.

Gloria and Roberts had no difficulty in getting them to talk; the Bellamys had already decided to go to the police with the whole story even before the detectives got there. They'd lived in utter panic ever since the kidnapper had called and said don't go to the police . . . after they'd already done so. But there was no longer a reason for them to keep quiet.

The Bellamys had their own import company, which they both worked at full-time. Occasionally one of them would leave early to pick Darren and Jamie up from school, but they weren't fanatic about it. The housekeeper usually went to fetch them.

"We'd like to talk to her," Gloria said.

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"She's not a live-in," Rose Bellamy explained, her words coming out in a rush. "She just works weekdays. She stayed with the boys until either Jack or I got home from work." Roberts took down the housekeeper's name and address.

They'd received one phone call from the kidnapper demanding a million dollars. "We couldn't raise the entire million in the time he gave us," Jack Bellamy said, "but we did get half of it. I put a note in with the money pleading for more time to raise the rest." He'd taken the cash to an abandoned gas station on Staten Island where he'd waited for a phone call that never came. They hadn't heard from the kidnapper since.

"But why?" Mrs. Bellamy demanded, her voice strident. "Did he mean to kill them all along? Was he just playing games with us?"

"Somethin' musta gone wrong," Gloria said, "and he couldn't leave any witnesses. We prolly got more'n one kidnapper here. Did the voice on the phone sound familiar at all?"

No, Mr. Bellamy said. The voice had been growly, hoarse. "Sounded phony as hell to me."

Gloria leaned forward. "Phony? As if he was trying to disguise his voice?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So why would he disguise his voice unless he was afraid you'd recognize it?"

His mouth fell open. "It's someone we know?"

"Maybe he was just being cautious, but the chances are you do know the kidnapper."

"Oh, good God," Mrs. Bellamy said.

"All right, then. Who do you and the Watermans know in common?"

"No one!" Mrs. Bellamy exclaimed. "Our only connection with the Watermans is through the kids. Darren and Kyra were in the same fourth-grade class at Claymore . . . Jamie was a first-grader. We know the Watermans through school functions, of course. And the boys sometimes went to their place to play after school, although more often Kyra came here. But outside of that, nothing."

"There's got to be some link between you," Gloria insisted. "The Watermans described the kidnapper's voice in much the same terms you did. Which suggests he knew both—" She broke off when she saw Jack Bellamy staring at her. "What?" she demanded.

"What happened to your accent?" he wanted to know.

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Roberts grinned crookedly. "It comes and goes. But you never had any contact with the Watermans outside of school functions?"

It had been building up a long time: Rose Bellamy finally exploded. "That stupid, *stupid* woman! Just driving off and leaving them on the street! If Janine Waterman paid half as much attention to her child as she did to her . . . her *glamour*—none of this would have happened!"

"Wait a minute," Roberts interrupted. "Are you saying Kyra Waterman was a neglected child?"

She waved a hand at him. "No, no, nothing like that. But Janine never listened to Kyra. She never even looked at her during school functions—her eyes were always someplace else. Sometimes I thought she was ashamed of Kyra. Janine is so absorbed in herself she can't even do a simple thing like making sure children get inside safely." Her voice was bitter.

"It's a strange family," Jack Bellamy agreed. "Harris and Janine are so glitzy, and Kyra . . . wasn't. She wouldn't have spent so much time over here if she was happy at home, would she? Kyra just didn't fit the rich and glamorous image her parents projected." He shook his head. "Poor kid. I wish now I'd paid more attention to her myself."

Gloria felt a flash of respect for Jack Bellamy. Here both his sons had just been killed, but he could still spare some sympathy for a misfit little girl he hadn't even known very well. "I know how rough this has to be on you both," she said, "but if you do think of some other link between you and the Watermans, give me a call." She handed Jack Bellamy her card. "Any time of the day or night."

He took the card without looking at it. "Find him," he said in a voice that was almost a hiss. "That bastard wiped out half our family. Find him."

The two detectives muttered reassurances and left. Neither one of them said anything for a moment, and then Roberts let out a breath. "Whew. I'm drained."

"Yeah." She knew what he meant. "Look, I'll drop you off at the stationhouse. There's something I gotta take care of at home."

"DiFalco's probably there by now."

"I won't be long."

On the drive back downtown Gloria kept hearing Jack Bellamy's voice in her head: *That bastard wiped out half our family.* "We need to talk to that housekeeper. How did they make arrangements about who picked up the kids when? You got an address on her?"

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"Yeah, in the Bronx. How will that help finger the guy who did the killing?"

Gloria didn't answer, thinking. "Janine and Harris Waterman had a story made up to tell us, about the girl visiting upstate."

"That was before they knew she was dead. Trying to explain her absence."

"Yeah, but if they made up one story, couldn't they make up another? The first one for us to see through, so we'd accept the second?"

"Huh? What are you getting at?"

Gloria shook her head. "I dunno. Just thinking out loud." *That bastard wiped out half our family.*

Roberts got out on East Fifth and Gloria drove on to a ribs joint. Gran Fran sometimes had trouble digesting ribs, but she did love them so. During the day she nibbled on whatever was in the fridge, when she remembered. But Gloria tried to make sure she ate every night.

The first thing Gloria did when she got home was go over and hug the other half of her family as hard as she could without hurting the old woman. Then she sprinkled Beano liberally over the ribs and made her grandmother promise not to wait up for her.

Back to the stationhouse. She was in luck; Captain DiFalco got there two minutes after she did.

"The commissioner wants to know why I haven't called in the FBI on a kidnapping case," DiFalco said. "I told him the FBI is most effective in trapping the perp at the ransom drop. But we're investigating murder now. The kidnapping part is over and done with."

"Did he buy it?" Gloria asked.

The captain grimaced. "He's given us twenty-four hours. If we don't have a suspect by this time tomorrow, the FBI takes over."

Gloria and Roberts exchanged a look. Twenty-four hours. And they didn't have a clue.

The sun was barely up, but already heat was shimmering up from the sidewalks: another scorcher. Gloria took a swallow of her coffee and wished she'd brought something cold to drink.

She was sitting in the car about four houses down from the Waterman place. Roberts had said he'd be at the stationhouse by seven; she still had plenty of time. The main problem was going to be staying awake.

Last night had been a bust. The three detectives who'd done a

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door-to-door in the Bellamy neighborhood had come up empty. Not many stores in the area—an art gallery, a gourmet foods shop. Most of the neighbors had no idea who the Bellamy kids were. The few that did remember seeing the boys around couldn't pinpoint the last time they'd seen them.

Gloria and Roberts had driven out to the Bronx to interview the Bellamys' housekeeper. How did the housekeeper know when someone else was picking up Darren and Jamie from school? Mr. or Mrs. Bellamy told her. Did Mrs. Waterman ever call and say she'd drive the boys home? No, Mrs. Bellamy always told her. Then she'd never spoken to Mrs. Waterman? No. Has this kind of mix-up ever occurred before? Never.

One final question: How long had she been working for the Bellamys? Nearly ten years, ever since Darren was born.

There was nothing more to be learned. Roberts grumbled all the way back to the ninth precinct about the waste of time. Next up: They'd done a search through old case records for an instance in which kidnap victims had been drowned. Nothing. At one in the morning they'd given up and gone home to grab a few hours sleep.

Gloria saw the door of the Waterman house open and was instantly out of the car. It was the Jamaican maid, on her way to early Mass. Gloria hurried to catch up with her and spoke to her in Spanish.

The first thing the maid said when she saw Gloria's detective shield was: "I have my green card!"

"Relax," Gloria told her. "I'm not from Immigration. I just want you to tell me a little about Kyra."

The maid—whose name was Veronica—didn't want to talk to her at first, but eventually Gloria persuaded her that all she was interested in was the child.

Veronica shrugged. "She was a fat little girl."

"That's it?"

"She was sullen. She looked at her feet when someone spoke to her. Not a pleasant child. And she had no sense of style at all."

"Not like her parents, huh?"

"Not like them at all. Do you know what I think? I think she was a changeling. Babies get mixed up in hospitals all the time!"

Gloria walked along with her as she talked, piecing together a picture of an unhappy child who'd failed to measure up to her parents' standards in just about every way. Not once did the maid express any sympathy for the girl's lot.

"They bought her her own Nordic Track," Veronica said. "They

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put it in her room so she'd see it every day and remember to exercise. Mrs. Waterman, she even framed some calorie-counter charts and hung them on the wall so Kyra would learn which foods were fattening. But did it do any good? No! How many times do I catch that girl in the kitchen stuffing food in her mouth?" She sighed in exasperation. "Why did she do that, eat all the time?"

Because she wasn't getting enough nourishment elsewhere. Gloria wondered what it would be like waking up every morning to find an exercise machine staring at you accusingly. She thanked Veronica for her help and went back to the car.

Roberts wasn't there yet when she got to the stationhouse. When he did come stumbling in, eyes still puffy with sleep and carrying a Styrofoam cup of coffee, she said, "Don't get comfortable. We're leaving."

"Where we going?"

"That school official who told the Bellamys' housekeeper that the kids had left with Mrs. Waterman—we want to talk to her. You got her name and address?"

"Yeah, but . . . why do we want to talk to her?"

"She can give us an objective picture of the kids."

"Fer gawd's sake, Sanchez, why do we keep going after the victims? That's not going to point us toward the killer."

"It might. I tell you right now, I think the Watermans' story sucks. They're holding something back."

He looked baffled. "What they told us dovetails with the Bellamys' story."

"Yeah, well, I don't have that part figured out yet. Come on, where does this woman live?"

Vice Principal Elizabeth Jasper lived in Chelsea, and she'd been asleep when the detectives rang her doorbell. "I can't offer you coffee," she said wryly, "because there's none made yet."

Gloria apologized for rousing her so early on a Sunday morning and promised not to take much of her time. "Just tell us what you can about Kyra Waterman."

"That poor child. And Darren and Jamie." Once the parents had been notified, the names of the victims had been made public. "Kyra was a problem. Oh, I don't mean she was disruptive in the classroom. But bringing her out of herself was a challenge for her teachers." She frowned. "Kyra was not a good student, and she had no social skills whatsoever. She didn't know how to interact with the other children and just stared at her feet whenever an adult said something to her. She sulked a lot, and wouldn't

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answer half the time she was spoken to. But she was showing improvement . . . a very slow improvement, but a steady one. She responded to praise and encouragement."

"But she made friends with Darren Bellamy," Roberts said.

Elizabeth Jasper's expression changed from a frown to a sad smile. "That was all Darren's doing. Darren was a lovely child—I think he was the *nicest* little boy I've ever known. Very considerate of others. He was the most popular boy in the class. Do you know, some of the other children used to stand by the door waiting for him to get there in the mornings?"

"Wow," said Gloria. "So what was it, opposites attract?"

"Their teacher says at first Darren probably just felt sorry for Kyra. He saw her alone and miserable, and his natural instinct was to reach out. But eventually something clicked between them and they became real friends. That's when Kyra started responding to her teachers' encouragement. Having a friend made all the difference."

"You talked to the parents about Kyra's problems?"

The Vice Principal looked uncomfortable. "The Watermans were very concerned that Kyra 'improve'—they used that word a lot. They were attentive parents, I'll give them that. They wanted her to be attractive and full of personality . . . which is not unreasonable. But they never seemed concerned with what Kyra might want."

She went on to explain that the children were not just turned loose at the end of the day; the school made sure every child had transportation or an escort. Mrs. Bellamy had called the school several months ago to say it was okay to let Darren and Jamie ride home with Mrs. Waterman and Kyra. So their door monitor had no reason to object when the boys told her they were going home with Kyra.

"Whoa," Gloria said. "Going home *with Kyra?* Mrs. Waterman dropped them all off at the Bellamys' place."

Elizabeth Jasper spread her hands and smiled. "Maybe they changed their minds."

They thanked her and apologized again for disturbing her so early. Gloria was silent as they started the drive back to the stationhouse; something Elizabeth Jasper said had hit home; the part about Kyra's parents not caring what she wanted. Was that what Gloria was doing to Gran Fran? Catering to her own wants instead of her grandmother's needs? *Why was it so hard to let go?*

Roberts broke the silence. "I had no idea Kyra was like that."

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Gloria came out of her funk. "Wait till I tell you about Veronica." She repeated her conversation with the Watermans' maid.

"Sounds like a pretty grim life for the kid," Roberts commented. "How does this get us any closer to the killer?"

Gloria wasn't yet ready to articulate the horror of what was becoming increasingly obvious to her. "This next part's gonna be tough. Even though it's Sunday, we gotta get hold of people in that company where Waterman's the CEO—Bracewell Communications? Find out his status in the conglomerate that owns the company. What kind of man he is. Whether he's considered ruthless."

She watched his face as it dawned on Roberts what she was getting at. He was aghast.

It took them the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon, but Gloria and Roberts were able to track down enough of Bracewell Communications' executives to get a clearer picture of Harris Waterman. Every one of them found it most interesting that the police were asking questions about him.

They all agreed that Waterman was clever and competent, but they all found some way to hedge on their praise; it wouldn't do to make a rival look *too* good. They all lived in a post-yuppie world built on rivalry; it was survival of the fittest in a way Darwin had never envisioned. How important was a man's family in the corporate scheme of things? The family a man built around him was a good measure of the man himself, was the reply.

They all had been in each other's houses, knew what decorators they all used, what cars they drove. They belonged to the same clubs, used the same caterers, carried the same credit cards. Presenting a successful, prosperous face to the world was very much a part of Bracewell's game plan.

And Harris Waterman played the game well. The president of the parent company that owned Bracewell Communications was retiring next year, and Waterman was in the running to take over the whole shebang. And yes, he was ruthless in getting what he wanted.

Gloria and Roberts did most of their interviewing over the phone, but they paid visits to a couple of the higher-ranking executives. In both places they saw alert, outgoing, attractive children . . . who wore their designer clothes well. They were all the things that Kyra Waterman could not be.

Not all of the execs had met young Kyra; one of them expressed the opinion that the Watermans had kept her hidden away as

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much as possible. Those who had seen her couldn't quite keep the smirk out of their voices, even while murmuring conventional expressions of sympathy for the Waterman family. But all that was secondary; their primary concern was that what had happened to the Watermans could also happen to them. *Protect your own turf at all costs.*

Both Gloria and Roberts had ended their interviews with bad tastes in their mouths. When they called Captain DiFalco, he came in immediately.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "You're saying the Watermans killed their own daughter . . . because she was *unsatisfactory?*"

Gloria sighed. "You don't know these people, Captain. To them, appearance is everything. The whole world they live in is like that. I don't know whether they really thought Kyra was enough of a drawback to keep Harris Waterman from getting his promotion. More likely she just didn't fit into the picture of the ideal life they were building for themselves. Kyra was a . . . an inconvenience."

DiFalco rubbed his hand over his mouth. "Jesus Christ. Now I've heard everything."

"It's sick," Roberts said in the understatement of the year.

"Evidence. You've got no evidence."

"We got *pointers,*" Gloria said. "The door monitor at the school said the Bellamy boys told her they were going home with Kyra. Janine Waterman said she dropped them off at their own house."

"Soft, Sanchez."

"Okay. The voice of the 'kidnapper' on the phone sounded disguised, the Bellamys said. It was Waterman who called them, pretending Darren and Jamie were being held for ransom. He was afraid Jack Bellamy would recognize his voice."

"So those boys died only because they happened to be with Kyra at the time the Watermans had planned to kill her?"

"Looks like it. The man is ruthless, Captain."

He was silent for a while. Then: "What about the wife? Is she as ruthless as the husband?"

"She's more a go-along type, I'd say. Not exactly a birdbrain, but she's none too quick. Janine would follow Harris's lead."

"Bring her in," the Captain ordered. "Lean on her. I don't care how you do it, but get her to say something incriminating. I'll get someone from the D.A.'s office in here. Let's see if we have a case."

"Sick," Roberts repeated.

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Janine Waterman was openly appalled by her surroundings; Gloria thought she'd probably never been in a police station in her life. And the ninth precinct stationhouse was worse than most. Their suspect stared at the one-way mirror in the wall, aware that they were being watched.

They'd brought in both the Watermans. Harris had insisted on calling their lawyer and was left to stew in a different interrogation room under guard until the attorney got there. They didn't have much time.

Gloria sat across a table from Janine Waterman, while Roberts stayed on his feet, ready to bark a question at the suspect from behind her. Gloria plunged right in: "You didn't drop the three kids off at the Bellamy place. You took them home with you."

The other woman started to protest, but Roberts snapped, "Don't interrupt!"

"We have witnesses, Mrs. Waterman. Two of them." Gloria was a good liar. "Witnesses who saw you bring the kids to your place on the Monday they supposedly disappeared. The day you and your husband killed them."

Janine Waterman's pretty face was stricken; she looked as if she couldn't believe this was happening. Finally she managed to ask, "Who?"

"Who are the witnesses? A neighbor across the street and a street cleaner."

"A what?"

"Street cleaner. One of those no-name guys who keep your street prettier than my street. And both the witnesses will testify in court that you had the two Bellamy boys with you when you brought Kyra home. You've been lying to us all along."

Mrs. Waterman didn't answer, her eyes darting around the small interrogation room, looking for escape, not knowing what to say.

"We know what you did. And we know why you did it. And in case you hadn't heard, the state of New York has brought back the death penalty."

That got to her. Her eyes focused on Gloria, trying to make sense of what was happening. "How . . . how could you know . . ." She trailed off.

When she didn't continue, Roberts said, "Best scenario, you're going to live the rest of your life in prison. Get used to the idea."

She gasped. "The rest of my life?"

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"You were expecting time off for good behavior?" Gloria asked drily. "Forget it. Look around you, Mrs. Waterman. You don't like the looks of this place? This is the Taj Mahal compared to where you're going."

The woman burst into tears. When she'd regained some measure of control, she said, "You've got it wrong! We didn't kill Kyra! We *loved* Kyra!"

"No, you didn't. You were ashamed of her. She embarrassed you. And she was in the way. So you got rid of her."

She buried her face in her hands.

First Gloria and then Roberts kept pounding away at her, not about what she'd done but about what was going to happen next. They told her about her temporary stay at Rikers Island with the pushers and the whores, followed by the shame and humiliation of a public trial. They made her see how degrading and dangerous her life in prison would be. They kept at it until Gloria judged the time was right.

"You're going to prison, no question—but you don't have to be a gray-haired old lady when you come out," Gloria told her. "There's a way."

It took a moment to sink in. Janine Waterman stared at her blankly and then said, "A way?"

"A way to shorten your sentence. You'd get out while you're still young enough to build a life."

She moistened her lips. A whisper: "How?"

"Help us. Give us details, testify against Harris." Gloria switched to sympathetic mode. "We know this wasn't your idea. You were just helping your husband, right? Maybe he even talked you into it. Why should you pay the same penalty as him?"

Roberts said, "Cooperate with us now, and you're out in a few years. Your attorney can make a deal with the D.A. It's done all the time."

A gleam of hope appeared in Janine Waterman's eyes.

Gloria saw it. "Start by telling us why the Bellamy boys were killed too. Why not just tell them they couldn't come over that day?"

One last moment of hesitation, and then she decided. "It would look suspicious—something I'd never done before. You know. It might call attention to me. Harris said do everything the same as usual."

"Then why not postpone your plans for Kyra until the boys weren't there?"

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"The alibi. Harris had an alibi established for that afternoon. It had to be then."

"Uh-huh. And what kind of alibi did he have established for you?"

Their suspect's face slowly turned appalled, then frightened, then angry.

Good God, Gloria said to herself. *She hadn't even thought of that.* Rose Bellamy was right; Janine Waterman was a stupid woman.

But it had the effect of strengthening her resolve to cooperate. Harris Waterman had flown to Boston on business that morning. He'd checked into a hotel and then flown right back under a different name. He'd made his third flight of the day, back to Boston, after the deed was done.

The children had all been alive the last time she'd seen them; the delicate, sensitive Mrs. Waterman couldn't bear to watch. Harris had told the kids he was taking them for a boat ride.

"A boat ride? Where?"

"Oh, from the boathouse, of course. The docks are enclosed, so no one could see Harris when . . . when he did it."

"What boathouse?"

Janine Waterman flinched. "Bracewell maintains boating facilities for its executive officers," she said, "in a little town upriver called Fremont. An hour's drive, about. But you don't—"

The door burst open and a stocky, gray-haired man erupted into the room. "Janine, don't say another word. Detectives, I need to speak to my client alone. Not here—in a room without one of those." He gestured in annoyance at the one-way mirror.

"Certainly," Gloria replied smoothly. She called in an officer to escort them to a room where they could talk—and to stand guard outside. "Mrs. Waterman," Gloria asked, "this is your husband's attorney? He's looking out for your *husband's* best interests?"

Janine Waterman stared at the man wide-eyed.

"Don't pay any attention to them, Janine," he said. "They're playing at divide-and-conquer." The two of them left with their police escort.

Gloria and Roberts exchanged a look and both heaved a sigh of relief. They went into the observation room on the other side of the one-way mirror.

DiFalco and a woman named Perry from the D.A.'s office were still staring through the glass at the now-empty interrogation room. "Well?" DiFalco asked.

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"You'll need to place him at the boathouse on the day in question," Perry said.

"We'll do it," the captain said quickly. "Now that we know where to look. We'll get you a witness."

"Get two. All right—charge them. I'll get things started at my end."

DiFalco smacked his fist against his palm. *Yes!*

"We're going for maximum sentencing on this one," Perry went on.

"For him?"

"For both of them."

DiFalco scowled. "She won't sign a statement without a deal. She—"

"I'm making no deals with a bitch who would help kill her own child. You get me those witnesses." Perry's gaze turned inward. "Those two—they're not quite human, are they?" She pressed her lips together and made her way out of the room.

The three cops she left behind shared a moment of grim satisfaction. "That was good work, Sanchez," DiFalco said. "You too, Roberts. *Real* good work."

Roberts mumbled something, pleased.

"Thanks, Captain," Gloria said. "I guess this is the right moment to tell you—I need some personal time. A week."

"Take it later. You've got witnesses to find."

Gloria sighed. "Captain, you send two men with Roberts and it's a one-day job. You don't need me."

"Half a day," Roberts promised.

DiFalco never gave in easily. "A week all at once? Couldn't you spread it out a little?"

Gloria shook her head. "I'm going to Alabama. I need a full week."

Roberts helped out again. "We can handle it, Captain."

"Okay, then," DiFalco agreed. "Visiting the old homestead, are you?"

Gloria had never been to Alabama in her life. "Yeah. That's right."

"Well, have a good trip."

She nodded toward his departing back. "It will be." *Now that I've finally let go.* ●

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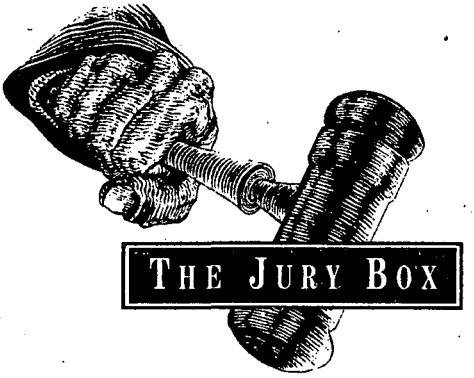

by Jon L. Breen

Since the original editor of this magazine, Ellery Queen himself, was the compiler of the classic bibliography *The Detective Short Story* as well as selector of important single-author short-story collections in *Queen's Quorum*, the "Jury Box" critic has a special duty to keep up-to-date on new collections in the field. The crime short story has been prematurely buried more times than the Broadway theatre, but *EQMM*, its stablemate *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, a number of shorter-lived pro and semi-pro periodicals, and a large annual output of original anthologies, not quite all of them edited by Martin H. Greenberg and/or Ed Gorman, give the crime short enough momentum to survive into the new millennium.

Although single-author collections were commercially dicey even when the pulps and slicks were publishing short stories by the bushel, if anything their number has increased in the past few years. Late 1996 brought a new collection from one of the form's best contemporary writers, Robert Barnard, *The Habit of Widowhood and Other Murderous Proclivities* (Scribner, $21); a group of four tales about a new husband-and-wife sleuthing team from perennial bestseller Mary Higgins Clark, *My Gal Sunday* (Simon and Schuster, $23); a very handsome small-press volume of stories by little-known pulp magazine writer Howard Wandrei, *The Last Pin* (Fedogan & Bremer, 4325 Hiawatha Avenue, #2115, Minneapolis, MN 55406; $29 trade; $95 limited); and another new collection of long out-of-print tales by Grand Master Vincent Starrett, *The Memoirs of Jimmie Lavender* (Metropolitan Toronto Reference

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Library [order from The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, George A. Vanderburgh, P.O. Box 204, 420 Owen Sound Street, Shelburne, Ontario, Canada LON 1SO]; $25 U.S.) Add to those the first short-story collection by a contemporary favorite of classical detection fans.

*** Amanda Cross: *The Collected Stories,* Ballantine, $19.95. Eight of the nine stories concern Kate Fansler, the first three (and best) of which appeared in *EQMM,* though the lack of consideration the vanished professor in "Tania's Nowhere" showed her husband bothered me as much on rereading as it did a decade ago. "The Disappearance of Great Aunt Flavia" offers a jaundiced critique that won't make me stop loving that holiday perennial *It's a Wonderful Life.* The one new story, "The George Eliot Play," is closest to a Fansler novel in its emphasis on a single literary subject. Cross (a.k.a. Carolyn Heilbrun) and her professorial sleuth are as good company at short lengths as at long.

**** Lindsey Davis: *Time to Depart,* Mysterious, $23. The seventh Marcus Didius Falco novel is one of the best, rich in humor, domestic details, action, and devious plot spinning. While Falco usually operates like a private eye, his association with the vigiles makes this one a Roman police procedural. The title refers to the legal provision that a condemned criminal may escape execution through voluntary exile, a choice organized crime chief Balbinus Pius appears to be making as the novel begins.

**** K.C. Constantine: *Family Values,* Mysterious, $22. After one book out of the spotlight, retired Rocksburg, Pennsylvania police chief Mario Balzic returns to action, investigating a years-old drug-dealing murder case that may have resulted in the wrong man's conviction. Some crime writers surpass Constantine in the building of plots and the creation of suspense, but no one can match him for eloquently realistic dialogue and characters who, from Balzic himself to the most minor walk on, spring to life.

**** Michael Crichton: *Airframe,* Knopf, $26. Crichton's attributes are the opposite of Constantine's: his natural-sounding dialogue moves the story along but never soars, and his characters, though recognizably human, are probed no more deeply than needed to tell them apart. But for plot, pace, suspense, and technical background detail, he has few equals. Casey Singleton, VP and media spokesperson for a major aircraft manufacturer, tries to find

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out what caused a fatal in-flight incident while dodging the machinations of media, labor, and executives of her own company. (Apart from *The Lost World*, his *Jurassic Park* sequel, Crichton is the rare bestselling novelist who always takes on fresh subject matter.)

*** William Bernhardt: *Naked Justice,* Ballantine, $22. Tulsa attorney Ben Kincaid defends ex-mayor Wallace Barrett, a former football hero accused of the murder of his wife and children. Echoes of the O.J. Simpson case—DNA, shoeprints, the suspect's flight—are clearly no coincidence. Bernhardt is one of the better lawyer-novelists. Though a contrived subplot helps fill out the 400 pages, the courtroom action crackles and the dandy surprise twist is prepared for via some broad clues for the attentive reader.

*** Bill Blum: *The Last Appeal,* Onyx, $6.99. California defender Peter Harrigan handles the final appeal (twelve years after the trial) of a student leftist assessed the death penalty. Recalling *Chinatown,* the plot concerns the state's constant struggle for water. Politics, legal maneuvering, and local color are expertly deployed in a novel vastly better and more original than Blum's first, *Prejudicial Error* (1995), though the all-loose-ends-tied finish may strike some readers as a bit too pat and convenient.

*** Sarah Gregory: *Public Trust,* Signet, $5.99. In her second appearance, Texas lawyer Sharon Hays is also trying to save a condemned man from the death house. I found this well-crafted and complicated tale of political and legal infighting more satisfactory than the Bino Phillips novels the author writes as A. W. Gray, but feminist readers may not take kindly to some of the male-writing-as-female author's assumptions and attitudes, including the use of the Limbaughism *femi-Nazi.*

*** Dennis Etchison: *Double Edge,* Dell, $5.50. Lizzie Borden was the nineteenth-century O. J. Simpson: acquitted in court, convicted by public opinion. True crime writers have tried to pin the Borden murders on someone else—and you can bet years to come will find even more such attempts on behalf of Simpson. In the latest from a justly admired horror specialist, TV writer Jenny Marlow, working with her troubled husband on a Borden docudrama, encounters contemporary murder and menaces and arrives at an (I think) original, if unlikely, alternate solution to the enduring 1892 whodunit.

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Sir Templeton Hughes & Nicholas Blood, P.I., Explain Their Motives

by J.P. Farrell

A convenient scream in the midnight air
From a character actress with glossy hair
There's a dry ice fog and the ground is hard
This looks like a case for Scotland Yard
As the strumpets pace these gaslit streets
The cobblestones echo with running feet
Every passing face is smeared with soot
Quick to it, Albright, the game's afoot

Los Angeles and a nest of thieves
And a foul-mouthed blonde who only acts bereaved
She's a murder witness paid well to forget
So I don my trench and light a cigarette
Under fedora brim, I watch her pad
And with legs like that, she can't be all bad
But she's played me crooked, passing phony bills
And what my fists can't handle, my pistol will

There are those of us who won't knuckle under
To the ones who break the Law
We expose their flaws with keen observation
Or lay a roundhouse on their jaw
When foul play rears its bloody head
For the sake of greed or guilt
We scour the shadows for a single man
In these cities men have built

Poem © J.P. Farrell 1997

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NEXT ISSUE...

Games of Chance
BY CLARK HOWARD

Poisoned with Politeness
BY GILLIAN LINSCOTT

Unmarked Graves
BY GEORGE C. CHESBRO

The Fruit Cellar
BY BARBARA OWENS

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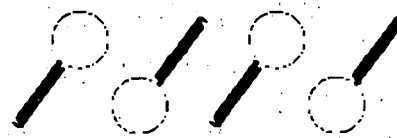

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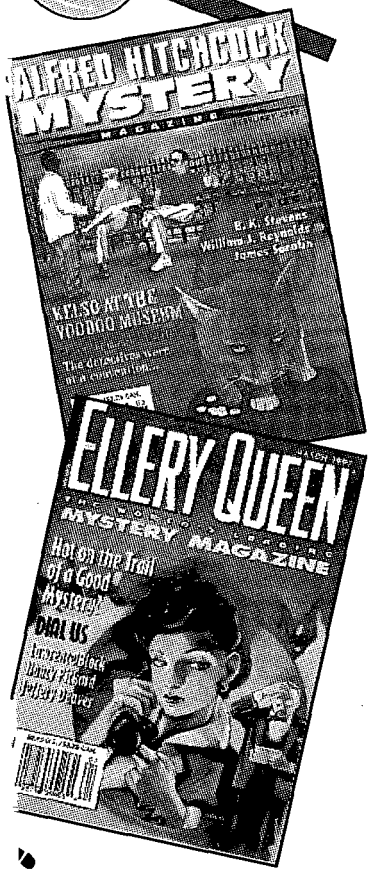

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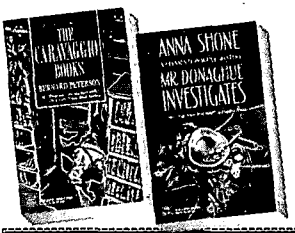

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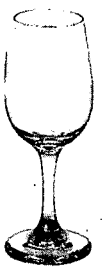

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